

Reasons Public Safety Agencies Do Not Embrace the Low Power FM Service

Frequency Unavailability

In almost all areas of the USA, AM frequencies are available for public safety agencies to broadcast on AM (Information Stations/TIS). This is not the case for Low Power FM (LPFM), especially in more densely populated areas where FCC separation rules make application for FM frequencies impossible.

On the Bubble

Like low power AM stations, low power FM stations are secondary to conventional broadcasters, who are primary. But because the FM band is so congested and fluid, the odds of a LPFM station being forced to suspend operations or change frequencies due to the addition of a primary-class FM station or an FM translator in their area is high. In contrast, the AM band is rather static, resulting in a very low chance that a licensee would have to suspend operation or change frequencies.

Frequency Competition

Governmental entities apply for AM Information Radio Stations on a first-come-first-served basis and can be almost certain of receiving the 10 year licenses. But getting a grant for a Low Power FM station is a different matter because virtually any nonprofit educational institution may also apply for a LPFM license. Consequently, it's likely there will be a much larger pool of applicants in a given area. Almost every nonprofit group and church in the area could be a potential applicant. This means there could be multiple applicants for each open frequency. A FCC-mandated point system will determine which applicants are most qualified.

Shared Operation

Because the FCC's required qualifications are so low, most LPFM applicants will be at the highest level of qualification, therefore, there are likely to be multiple grantees. In those situations, the FCC will require all equally qualified applicants to share the operation of the frequency. This means each LPFM licensee would only have use of the frequency for a few hours per day. To make matters worse, in highly populated areas, such licensees might only be able to broadcast on certain years of the 8-year license term. This is not the right picture for a public safety agency that might need to speak to the public at any time of day or night.

Unpredictable Costs

The FCC recommends that broadcast engineering and broadcast law firms be employed by the public safety agency as it navigates the application process and the subsequent construction and operation of the LPFM station. Especially if there are multiple applicants for the frequency, the process could stretch the timeline and the budget for the station. The result is that the real costs associated with a LPFM station are unknown until the station is built and on the air. None of this is applicable to AM Information Radio Stations, whose costs and timelines are predictable at the outset.