



## Educational Communications Board

3319 West Beltline Highway • Madison, WI 53713-4296 • 608.264.9600 • ECB.org

### EDUCATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS BOARD MEETING

via WisLine

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April 24, 2020

9:30 A.M.

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#### EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REPORT

Marta Bechtol, Executive Director

#### COVID-19

Emergency communications are essential in times like these; it's our job to be ready. As a small agency providing a critical public service, nearly everyone on staff is an essential worker. Immediately following the governor's declaration of the health emergency on March 12, ECB implemented our robust Continuity of Operations Plan. Staff began preparing for remote operations and physical distancing right away and by Tuesday, March 17 (less than a week later) nearly all agency staff was telecommuting in advance of the *Safer at Home* order. Even master control operations are minimally staffed onsite, with most OC staff able to work from home.

Initial challenges were faced by the agency's I.T. staff ensuring that everyone had the equipment needed to continue doing their jobs, but these issues were not widely spread and resolved within the first week. Broadcast operations and equipment maintenance continues at routine levels to ensure that our signals are reliable and on the air. Most slowdowns are due to delays with suppliers over which we have no control.

The biggest public-facing service change brought about due to COVID-19 has been the shift to a 12-hour educational programming block on the Wisconsin channel. The result of a coordinated effort among PBS Wisconsin, PBS Wisconsin Education, the Department of Public Instruction and ECB reflect public broadcasting's long-standing commitment to K-12 education.

There will be financial impacts of the pandemic to the agency of which you should be aware. Overages are expected in personnel costs related to physical distancing from regular work locations; and corporate development/fundraising losses due to the fact that events have been cancelled and relationship-building can no longer take place face-to-face. We should be able to absorb these unanticipated expenses through budget offsets in the remainder of this fiscal year.

Morale at ECB remains high which I attribute to the sense of mission: we are providing vital information, educational and emergency services to our state at a time they are most needed. And although we're not accomplishing this in our usual way, statewide service has remained



uninterrupted. As we often say around here, “A good day in broadcasting is a day when nobody knows anything has happened.”

### **State Budget Update**

The State Budget Office has started issuing its initial assignments for the FY21-23 biennial budget. I believe we’re as prepared as we can be for the work ahead. On the capital front, Engineering leadership has developed a 20-year forward equipment replacement plan that enables us to smooth our anticipated costs over time for more sustainable budgeting. This significant foundational work has positioned us well for the more immediate budget project ahead, and will continue to serve us in the decades to come. The 6-year plan and biennial capital request are expected to be due in mid-July.

ECB intends to proceed with the FCC-authorized transmitter upgrades and power increases at WHWC-Menomonie, WHRM-Wausau and WLEF-Park Falls and anticipates that these will go before the State Building Commission in May. This should give us time to get the work completed before our FCC construction permits expire.

Due to the unknown financial impacts of the COVID-19 crisis this current fiscal year, the Department of Administration has frozen recruitment and placed a hold merit compensation that would otherwise have been allocated following annual staff performance reviews.

### **Federal Budget Update**

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed at the end of March earmarked \$75M for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). The language for the allocation specifies its intent to be used for fiscal stabilization grants to “maintain programming and services and preserve small and rural stations threatened by declines in non-Federal revenues.”

Whether any of this funding will find its way to ECB is still to be determined. CPB is in the process of setting guidelines for distribution of this money. The granting process will come before the CPB Board of Directors on April 27 for approval.

### **Advocacy Update**

At the end of February, Gene Purcell (Wisconsin Public Media, UW-Madison), Niles Berman (Wisconsin Public Radio Association), Bohdan Zachary (Milwaukee PBS), Mark Foley (Milwaukee Area Technical College Board) and I attended America’s Public Television Stations (APTS) Public Media Summit in Washington D.C. This annual event helps strengthen relationships with our federal legislators and their staff members. We were struck by the warm welcomes we received in their offices and were encouraged by their feedback regarding the activity of constituents in support of public broadcasting.

Meanwhile, the State Advocacy Day scheduled for Wednesday, April 15<sup>th</sup> was cancelled.



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### **Rural Broadband**

Conversations regarding ECB assets and rural broadband continue with increased attention due to pressing statewide necessity as a result of the quarantine. We have put together a pilot project proposal with Novus Labs for potential implementation at our facilities in Bloomington and Highland. We are working with the Department of Public Instruction and the Public Service Commission on next steps.