

Radio format change prompts community criticism

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAVANNAH, Ga. — Format changes at a popular radio station have prompted some critics to question whether the new programming is an act of censorship or racism.

While some listeners turned their dials to WSOK-AM to hear the station's gospel offerings, others turned to it for its political commentary, and candidates knew it. The Rev. Jesse Jackson visited the station during his presidential campaign, and former Govs. Roy Barnes and Zell Miller made stops there along the campaign trail.

Earlier this year, the station said no more.

Dubbed the voice of Savannah's black community, WSOK made a policy decision to stop broadcasting live shows. Radio hosts wanting to air shows would have to tape them first, eliminating the call-in format for the station's "Open Line Outreach" programs.

Alderman Van Johnson II and Mayor Otis Johnson are former radio show hosts, and both have written letters to Clear Channel Communications, which owns the station.

"It concerns me that your decision has the unintended consequence of silencing at worst, and censorship at best, of the African American community," Johnson wrote in a January letter to Clear Channel Communications. "What you have done is created a gap in our community."

Alderman Van Johnson II also questioned why Clear Channel did not make format changes at another of its stations, WTKS 1290-AM, which attracts a largely white audience.

"Two stations - 1230 AM and 1290 AM - one African American and the other white," Johnson wrote. "One station is requiring talk shows be pre-recorded, the other allows live dialogue. What is the difference?"

A Clear Channel representative said the two stations have different formats.

While the 1,000-watt station barely reaches the entire city of Savannah, many of the city's black residents rarely turn their dials off WSOK 1230 AM.

State Sen. Regina Thomas, D-Savannah, said the station's gospel-and-talk-show format has inspired and informed listeners for 30 years, making the station "the radio church of the black

community." The program has regularly earned first or second place in Arbitron's local ratings.

Local jazz bassist Ben Tucker came up with the format after buying the station in 1972.

"I felt strongly that African-Americans in the United States of America were not being communicated to properly," Tucker said. "I viewed it as an opportunity to open the airwaves to the people and help give them an understanding of the educational, economic, political and spiritual world around them."

The Rev. Leonard Small's show has sparked the cur-

rent controversy. Small regularly endorsed politicians, most recently mayoral and City Council candidates. Mayor Otis Johnson and Alderman Clifton Jones would have been unseated if Small had his way.

"I personally do not trust him, and I believe he has tried to set himself up as a political broker using free air time," Jones wrote in November to WSOK. "I also know that all the rest of us are paying your station for any time used to promote us."

Clear Channel Operations Manager Brad Kelly said Otis Johnson, too, complained about Small plugging

a local candidate. Small's show didn't violate Federal Communications Commission rules, Kelly said, but it did break WSOK programming guidelines, he said.

The station is more concerned with music and public-service messages than political discourse, he said.

WSOK Program Director

E. Larry McDuffie sent letters to radio hosts in January explaining future shows would have to be taped. He said he did it because personnel cuts had made it too difficult to run the control boards for the mostly nighttime live shows.

Small protested by forfeiting his air time.

"I said that would kill the spontaneity of the call-in format, and I wouldn't do it," Small said, explaining he was told by Clear Channel that he should be covering events like blood drives, not entrenched political issues. "I said I would not have a white man telling me what the black community needs."

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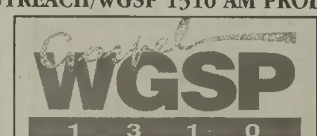
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