

Campaign Finance - FCC

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Campaign air time focus of FCC inquiry

By Jim Landers

The Dallas Morning News

WASHINGTON Urged on by Vice President Al Gore, the Federal Communications Commission began an inquiry Wednesday into whether digital TV broadcasters should give candidates free air time.

The question is part of a broader review into digital television's public-service obligations.

Digital television allows broadcasters to transmit multiple streams of video, audio and data over a single channel.

Broadcasters already have obligations to provide children's programming and other services on analog stations, and commissioners are trying to determine whether additional rules are needed for the new technology.

All five commissioners approved the overall inquiry. But the two Republicans objected to looking at candidate air time, saying it intruded into issues best left to Congress.

Broadcasters, meanwhile, said any free-air-time mandates

would violate their First Amendment rights. Dennis Wharton, a spokesman for the National Association of Broadcasters, said there is no compelling reason for "saddling our industry with additional obligations."

On Oct. 20, Gore wrote Chairman William Kennard urging the commission to act on an advisory committee report submitted a year ago to the White House, Congress and the agency.

Gore, saying he was writing for President Clinton as well, said the FCC "at the very least" should consider the committee's recommendation that broadcasters voluntarily give candidates five minutes of free air time in the last month of an election campaign.

Commissioner Harold Furchtgott-Roth criticized the agency's vote to explore the five-minute free time recommendation.

He called it "a painful and targeted tax" on broadcasters.

Republican commissioner Michael Powell objected to "an unelected body taking up issues which could fundamentally alter political discourse."

Advocates for free air time applauded the commission's action. The Alliance for Better Campaigns said the industry has done little to rein in the most expensive area of political campaigns: TV commercials.

"The longer the industry spurns these recommendations, the stronger the case becomes for mandates," said executive director Paul Taylor. "The FCC inquiry offers a forum to build such a case."

Robert W. Decherd, a member of the advisory committee and chairman, president and chief executive officer of Dallas-based Belo Corp., said the issue should be left to individual broadcasters to deal with on a voluntary basis.

Dallas-based Belo's holdings include The Dallas Morning News and 16 television stations, including WFAA (Channel 8) in Dallas. Since 1996, the company has offered federal and gubernatorial candidates four to five minutes of uninterrupted air time.

Decherd said Belo would continue and possibly expand the offer in the 2000 elections.

But he said one reason such programs should not be mandatory is the lack of response Belo has encountered from some incumbent members of Congress.

"It's counter-intuitive to say we need to mandate a rigid system that is so obviously contrary to the press's First Amendment rights only to have candidates, usually incumbents, decline the opportunity," Decherd said.

The FCC's review is open-ended. The inquiry seeks comment on broadcasters' obligations regarding political discourse, disaster warnings, access for persons with disabilities and diversity.

Commission staffers left open the possibility that the FCC will move on to issuing rules for digital broadcasters.

Congress has imposed public interest obligations on broadcasters as a licensing condition since 1934. The rules were grounded in the idea that public airways were a scarce commodity, and those gaining access to them were obliged to include public service in their programming.

The industry currently provides three hours a week of children's programming, and offers political candidates advertising at the lowest rates.