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Broadcasters Face Angry Reception

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Last year, when public broadcasters scheduled their 2011 annual lobbying day in Washington, D.C., they anticipated the usual debate over federal funding for public television and radio. They did not expect a firestorm.

With officials from stations around the country preparing to converge on Capitol Hill the first week of April, the challenge to their lobbying agenda has grown exponentially.

House Republicans have proposed a spending plan for the rest of this fiscal year that would eliminate all federal funds for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Then a fundraiser for National Public Radio was caught on tape making negative remarks about conservative tea party members and suggesting it would be better if NPR didn't get any federal dollars.

The remarks, which prompted the resignation of NPR President Vivian Schiller last week, sent public broadcasting officials into damage-control mode, as they try to justify to even more skeptical Republicans why they deserve help from Congress.

"I can't imagine a worse development at a worse time," said Patrick Butler, president and chief executive of the Association of Public Television Stations. "This is embarrassing to people who are trying to do right."

Butler said the goal in the weeks ahead will be to explain to lawmakers the way the funding works and how the victims of severe cuts will be smaller stations who depend most heavily on federal dollars.

Almost 90 percent of federal funds go directly to local stations, with the remaining money allocated for programming and operation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, he said. At some stations, 30 percent to 50 percent of the budget comes from federal funding, he added. If those dollars dry up, the stations could shut down, threatening the loss of as many as 21,000 jobs.

Local stations have mounted a campaign to save the funding, running on-air appeals asking listeners and viewers to contact their Members. In a 24-hour period last week, public broadcast fans sent 33,000 e-mails to Congress to save the funding.

On April 5, about 200 station officials will be fanning out on Capitol Hill to make their case. Earlier in the week they will attend discussions and listen to speakers. Schiller had originally been scheduled to be on a panel that includes the four leaders of public television and radio entities; she will be replaced by the interim head of NPR.

Butler said many representatives from smaller stations could not come to Washington because of budget limitations.

He acknowledged that at the end of the process, public broadcasting is prepared to take some cuts.

"We would not be surprised if we had to take a reduction in funding," he said.

A former Washington Post Co. executive and aide to former Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.), Butler joined the Association of Public Television Stations in January. Since then he has been trying to beef up the lobbying effort on the Hill, particularly with the new GOP majority in the House.

He has hired two well-connected lobbying firms with Republican ties to help him make inroads with the new Congress. One of those shops is Quinn Gillespie & Associates, where two former GOP House staffers, John Feehery and Marc Lampkin, are working on the account, Butler said.

The association also tapped Baker's firm, Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, to help in the lobbying. Taking the lead there is J. Keith Kennedy, the chairman of the firm's public policy group who was staff director for the Senate Appropriations Committee when Republicans were in the majority in 2005 and 2006.

In another effort to increase their presence on Capitol Hill, the Association of Public Television Stations joined in February with NPR to form the Public Media Association. The association, which is headed by Butler, is overseen by a legislative council comprised of four radio station leaders named by the NPR board of directors, four television station leaders named by the APTS action board, Butler and the NPR president.

Butler, a Republican, said that since coming to the association, he has met with key House GOP leaders, including Majority Leader [Eric Cantor](#) (Va.).

While he said that he had not met with the leaders since the latest public relations crisis involving NPR, he does not believe there has been any major shift in opinion on public radio funding.

"Nobody has changed his or her mind," he said.

One public relations expert said public broadcasters have done a poor job of convincing lawmakers that the system's beneficiaries are as much Middle America as coastal elite.

"Opponents have portrayed them as Chardonnay-sipping, East Coast, brie-eating" types, said Peter Mirijanian, a public relations specialist. But he said that public radio and television have a fan base in the middle of the country where programming is often tailored to those listeners.

....."I think they have many more allies than they know they have, and they have not used them effectively," he said.....

One lobbyist who is familiar with the issue also said the irony is that the public stations most in danger of closing are in districts represented by Republicans. On the other hand, stations in large metropolitan areas, more likely to be represented by Democrats, will likely survive because of a strong private fundraising base.

Eric Dezenhall, a public relations expert who specializes in crisis management, said the public broadcasters need to determine where they stand on the ideological spectrum.

The public broadcasting community is still banking on supporters in the Democratically controlled Senate to salvage at least some of their funding.

And last week President Barack Obama suggested that he doesn't believe cutting public broadcasting funds is the solution to solving budget crisis.

Obama said it was important to solve the budget issues in a comprehensive way. "And that means not just going after Head Start or Corporation for Public Broadcasting — that's not where the money is."

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