

Broadcasting cuts could ruin station budgets

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | Mar. 1, 2011

WASHINGTON -- You may have read that the House of Representatives passed a bill that cut \$61 billion in spending for the current federal fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30.

Among the cuts: eliminating the federal subsidy for public broadcasting.

House Republicans argue that with mounting budget deficits, cuts have to be made somewhere.

But it's safe to say that if Democrats had their hands on the budget-cutting scissors, they likely would have found other line items for making cuts. All of them in the House, along with three Republicans, voted against the bill.

How serious is the threat of defunding public broadcasting?

For one thing, it is not likely that the Democratic-controlled Senate will back the House's cuts.

For another, even if the Senate kept the cuts, President Barack Obama said he would veto any such bill -- although not specifically because of federal defunding of public broadcasting. The Republicans' House measure also cuts many domestic programs, foreign aid and some military programs.

Of course, with the drama behind a potential government shutdown resulting from an impasse between the House and Senate about raising the national debt ceiling, public broadcasting funding seems to be held hostage in a game of political "chicken." A compromise must be worked out by March 4 to avoid a shutdown.

The \$420 million -- that's less than \$1.50 per American, the lowest rate of support for public broadcasting, by far, of any Western industrialized nation -- allotted by Congress for fiscal 2011 is given to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which in turn makes allotments to public TV and radio stations.

WETA, which runs both a PBS affiliate and the only classical music radio station in Washington, stands to come up \$5.2 million short if the defunding were to stick.

As the father of a child attending a school that's staring at a 13 percent budget cut for 2011-12, I know there are plenty of grim choices to be made. There are certain fixed expenses that cannot be budgeted away -- unless you want to stop teaching children altogether, which I don't think anyone wants. But at least the school has four months to prepare for the following 12 months.

Even though they have other funding sources, public TV and radio stations are looking at massive cuts in their budgets immediately for at least the remaining seven months of the fiscal year, if not far longer.

"We found that the best public media -- the most independent and critical of government -- were also the best funded. Safeguarded from the kind of partisan interference that has become all too common in this country," said New York University professor Rodney Benson, co-author of a recent report comparing public media

systems around the world. "Our research shows that quality public media strengthen the quality of democracy. Amount of funding isn't everything. But it does make a difference."

"What the U.S. does not have is a guaranteed free flow of high-quality information provided to a universal audience in perpetuity," said Emily Bell of the British newspaper The Guardian in a Feb. 25 blog posting. "To abandon the idea of public media as a central strand of media policy looks rash in the extreme."

It's not the first time public broadcasting has been faced with getting its funding taken away. Back in 1969, Fred Rogers, the host of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," testified before a Senate subcommittee about the need for public broadcasting.

"I'm very much concerned, as I know you are, about what's being delivered to our children in this country," Rogers said then. "We deal with such things as the inner drama of childhood. We don't have to bop somebody over the head to make drama on the screen. We deal with such things as getting a haircut, or the feelings about brothers and sisters, and the kind of anger that arises in simple family situations."

And when was the last time you saw any of that dealt with on commercial TV?

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