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'Rimshot' radio

Clark County suffers in the shadow of Portland's electronic media umbrella

By BRETT OPPEGAARD
Columbian staff writer

Sometime during the next couple of months, Vancouver's newest radio station will go on the air — from downtown Portland.

This makes perfect business sense for the owner, Clear Channel, because the company already has several stations in the metropolitan area and says it can operate more efficiently by sharing studio space, sales staff and equipment.

Southwest Washington residents, though, once again are losing out, community leaders say.

Instead of becoming the most powerful electronic media source in Clark County, this new station will serve as just another example of direct access to public airwaves slipping away to Portland.

Southwest Washington cities join suburban brethren throughout America in this predicament as they collectively suffer for the repercussions of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. This act, which further deregulated electronic media, has allowed unprecedented consolidation of radio. In turn, second-tier and smaller cities across America, such as Vancouver, virtually have been silenced as their radio and television stations have been bought by huge corporations, moved to the nearest big city and refocused toward the core of the mass populous. The process is known in the business as "trinchet."

Dollars have been won, radio business experts say, while communities have been lost.

Bottom-line business

"This is all about commerce," said Jeremy Wilker, co-founder of Americans for Radio Diversity, a nonprofit organization in Roseville, Minn. "While these megamedia com-

panies are able to make money hand over fist, radio has become homogenized and bland, and no matter where you go, you hear the same songs, ... Unless you happen to hear a free-way report, it's hard to know what city you are in by just listening to the radio."

Before the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the first major overhaul of telecommunications law in more than 60 years, companies could own no more than four stations in one market and no more than 40 nationwide. Now, companies can own as many as eight in one market, and there is no limit on the total number. Consequently, thousands of stations (more than 40 percent in the country) have changed hands during the past three years, mostly gobbled up by corporations. Clear Channel, for example, now owns more than 400 stations. Combined with the other two largest radio companies, Chancellor and Infinity, the three own more than 1,100 stations and generate nearly \$5 billion in revenue each year, according to industry sources.

This has caused most independent owners — such as Vancouver's Dave Granger, who sold the city's KVAN-AM (1650) to Pamplin Broadcasting in December — to get out of the business. Granger said he just couldn't compete financially with the resources and efficiency of chain ownership.

"It really has changed the complexion of the industry," Granger said. "The great thing about radio for years was that it was local. ... Now policies are passed down from some corporate office in some other city. The focus is on the almighty dollar, and these companies can't take serving the community to the bank."

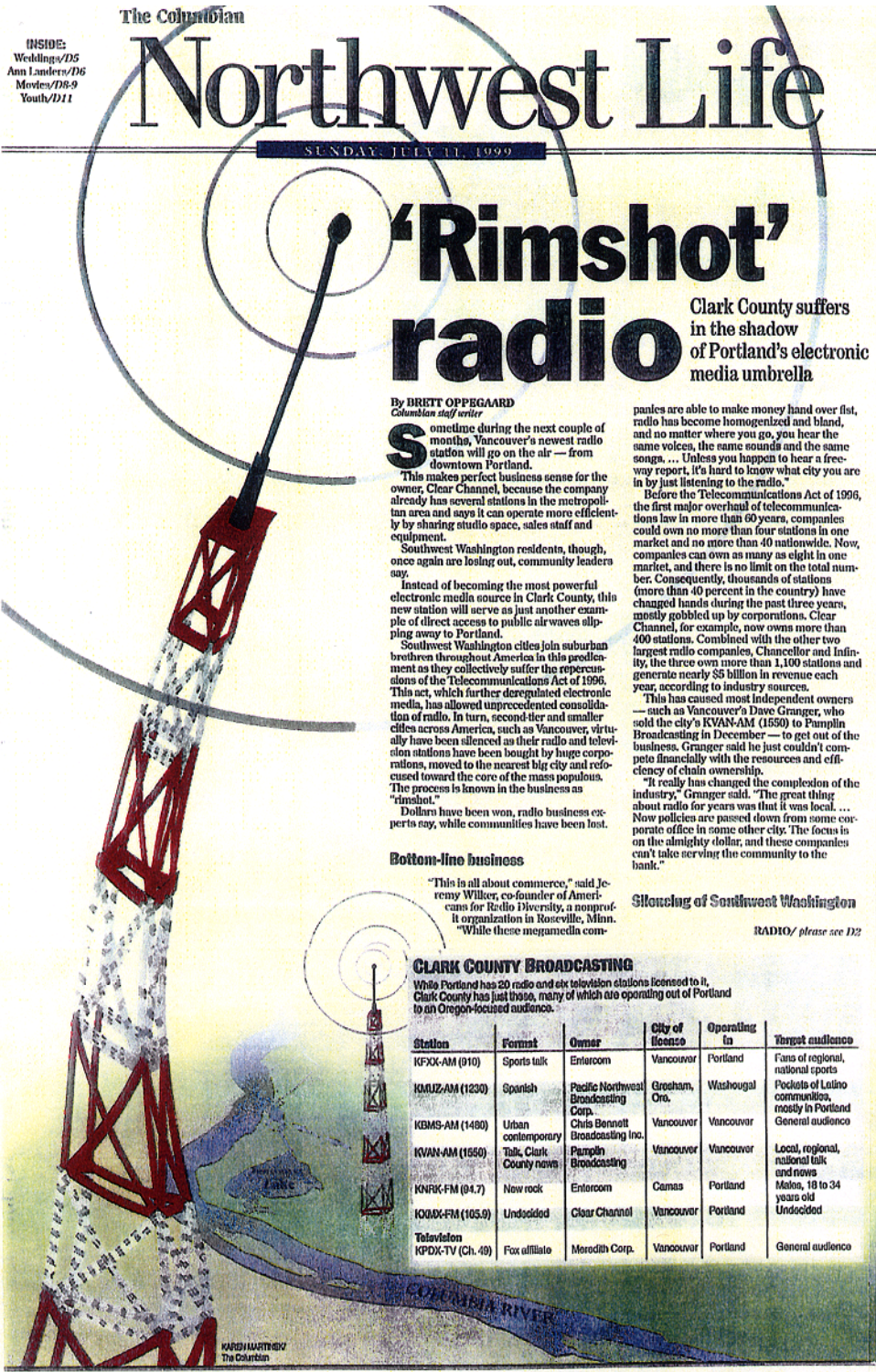
Silencing of Southwest Washington

RADIO/ please see D2

CLARK COUNTY BROADCASTING

While Portland has 20 radio and six television stations licensed to it, Clark County has just those, many of which are operating out of Portland to an Oregon-focused audience.

Station	Format	Owner	City of license	Operating in	Target audience
KFXN-AM (910)	Sports talk	Entercom	Vancouver	Portland	Fans of regional, national sports
KMUZ-AM (1230)	Spanish	Pacific Northwest Broadcasting Corp.	Gresham, Ore.	Washougal	Pockets of Latino communities, mostly in Portland
KBMS-AM (1480)	Urban contemporary	Chris Bennett Broadcasting Inc.	Vancouver	Vancouver	General audience
KVAN-AM (1650)	Talk, Clark County news	Pamplin Broadcasting	Vancouver	Vancouver	Local, regional, national talk and news
KNRK-FM (94.7)	New rock	Entercom	Camas	Portland	Males, 18 to 34 years old
KQAD-FM (105.9)	Undecided	Clear Channel	Vancouver	Portland	Undecided
Television					
KPDV-TV (Ch. 49)	Fox affiliate	Meredith Corp.	Vancouver	Portland	General audience



KARL HARTNEY/
The Columbian



DAVE BARRY

Green, blind, high-fivin' soccer lizard must die!

The only time I got really scared was when the mob surrounded me and began beating on my head. Fortunately, it was not my usual head: It was the head of a giant lizard.

I was wearing the giant-lizard head because — and this is why people who value their dignity should avoid journalism — I thought it would be fun to write about being a sports team mascot and engaging in combat with the crowd. The mascot that I wound up being is named "PK," which stands for "Penalty Kick." PK, a 7-foot green lizard, is the mascot for the Miami Fusion, a professional soccer team which I'm a big fan.

I like soccer because there's a lot of action and drama. There are no timeouts, so the only way players can catch their breath is to sustain a major injury, which some of them are very good at. A guy will get bumped by another player, or a beam of sunlight, and he'll hurl himself dramatically to the ground, writhing and clutching his leg (not necessarily the leg that got bumped) and screaming that the referee should get a priest out there immediately to administer the last rites, or at least call a foul. The referee generally ignores the player, who, after a while, gets up and continues playing. Some players suffer four or five fatal injuries per game. That's how tough they are.

Here's another example of soccer player toughness, which I am not making up: Last year, in Brazil, there was a soccer match between two arch-rival teams, one of which is nicknamed "The Rabbits." The other team scored a goal, and the guy who scored it celebrated by reaching into his shorts, pulling out a carrot, and EATING IT. He had a carrot in his shorts the whole time! Talk about team spirit! You wonder what he'd do if he played a team nicknamed "The Eel Eaters."

But back to my point: I asked Fusion officials if I could wear the PK costume at a game, and they said OK. And so one Sunday afternoon I found myself in an office next to the stadium, struggling into the PK outfit, which includes green leggings, green arms with only four fingers per hand, big feet, a 4-foot tall and a large lizard head with buggy eyes and a grinning, snouty mouth. Helping me put these items on was the regular Fusion mascot, Tony Mizzotti, who, when he is not a giant lizard, manages a supermarket meat department. As he attached my tail, Tony gave me some mascot tips, such as: "I high-five people, because if you shake their hands, they'll try to take off your fingers."

Finally I was suited up, and, with Tony guiding me, I waddled into the stadium. I wish you could have seen the crowd reaction. I wish I could have seen it, too. But I ran out that — biologists, take note — lizards actually see through their mouths, and my mouth was pointing down at a 45-degree angle, so all I could see was legs and small children. I saw a lot of children. They love to run directly into mascots at full speed, and they tend to hit you right where you'd carry your carrot, if you catch my drift.

Keeping a wary eye out for incoming tots, I moved slowly and blindly around the stadium, passing every now and then to wave at the crowd, enthusiastically and totally cluelessly, exactly like a U.S. presidential candidate. It was going pretty well until I wan-

BARRY/ please see D2

'Alpha Centauri' teaches players colonization, not destruction



By DAVE JEWETT
Columbian staff writer

Think computer games are primarily full of shooting, grisly violence and lightning-fast action?

Well, think again. The computer game currently reaping some of the most enthusiastic reviews is one with only the mildest violence in space warfare and with a decided emphasis on thinking.

It's "Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri," a turn-based strategy game involving colonization of a huge planet.

The United Nations has sent a spaceship to the planet in the Alpha Centauri system, with the hope it may provide mankind a new home for a declining Earth.

But trouble develops on the ship, and the colonists end up divided into seven factions. The game player assumes control of one of the factions and tries to lead it to domination on the planet.

"Alpha Centauri" emphasizes diplomacy, exploration and technological developments over warfare, which is almost a last resort. The player must deal with resource produc-

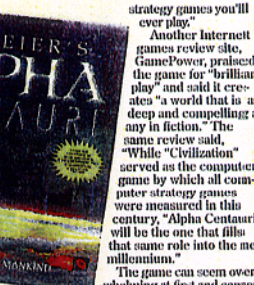
tion, city management, diplomacy, population, morale, technology advances, military units and other matters.

This is a deep, somewhat complicated game that could easily last for months. Included is a multi-player function for online competition with other players.

How good is it? PC Gamer, one of the biggest magazines in the field, has given it a score of 98 out of 100, making it the highest-rated game it has reviewed.

Computer Gaming World, another leading game magazine, gave "Alpha Centauri" a five-star ranking, its highest rating.

Gamecenter.com on the Internet says the game is "easily one of the best turn-based



strategy games you'll ever play." Another Internet games review site, GamePower, praised the game for "brilliant play" and said it creates "a world that is as deep and compelling as any in fiction." The same review said, "While 'Civilization' served as the computer game by which all computer strategy games were measured in this century, 'Alpha Centauri' will be the one that fills that same role into the next millennium."

The game can seem overwhelming at first and comes with a 240-page manual. The book wisely suggests players start right in with some tutorials, and save reading the volume for later. Good advice.

Radio

Only two of five stations licensed here are based here
From Page D1

KVAN is one of the two stations still operating in Vancouver, a city of about 135,000 residents in a county of about 330,000. While KVAN focuses much of its local programming on Southwest Washington news and talk, the other station, KBMS-AM (1490), serves a more general and urban audience.

The other three stations licensed to Clark County cities — Entercom's KPXX-AM (910) and KNKR-FM (94.7) and Clear Channel's new station, KXOM-FM (106.9) — are based in Portland. KNKR, for example, is licensed in Camas, yet has no presence there physically or otherwise. Its format — a new rock, aimed at males 18 to 34 years old — doesn't fit the area's image as a small mill town, nor is it necessarily intended by its listeners. The radio station's public file shows many Camas- or even Clark County-specific acts of community service. In this report, the station claims its nightly broadcasts of the nationally syndicated show "Loveline" and two early Sunday morning syndicated programs fill the community's needs.

When the Camas station originally was granted its license, in 1992, the owners were local and the adult contemporary format of the station fit the town pretty well, Camas Mayor Dean Dossett said. "Initially, some people here tried the station and liked it and listened to it fairly regularly," he said. "Now, as it has changed, it doesn't really fit us as far as the overall character of the city."

The FCC licenses stations to a particular city, rather than a market, because it determines there is a need for that area to have its own electronic media. Portland, for example, has enough radio and television stations that no more licenses are being granted for it, according to the FCC.

Yet companies still want a shot at the Portland market, they resort to the "limbo" approach. This technique involves the purchase of a station on the fringes of a major market, such as Clark County. The company then moves the operations of the station to the major city, boosts its license as well as essentially gains a new station in the prime market. Clear Channel, for example, paid more than \$20 million for its Vancouver license.

Ron Saito, Clear Channel's vice president and general manager in Portland, said, "We regard Vancouver no differently than we do Beaverton or Gresham or Salem. To us, it's all one and the same." Saito said because his company's five Portland-based stations — KKCV-FM (103.3), KKRZ-FM (100.3), KEX-AM (1190), KEWS-AM (620) and the new Vancouver station — are broadcast throughout the metropolitan area, including Clark County and Multnomah County, his staff must focus on the market as a whole to make money and succeed as a viable business, rather than on the city of license. Anyway, he said, Vancouver's issues don't differ that much from Portland's or its other suburbs. Many people in Clark County work in Portland. Even more have business dealings there.

"I don't think there is a feeling of separation," Saito said. "Portland stations have always covered things in Vancouver, politically and newswise. There has always been that close connection." Saito said he feels the same about the rest of the counties where his stations' signals hit. "They all deserve the same service," he said.

Clear Channel owns 17 stations along the Interstate 5 corridor, from Medford to Centralia, and has the capability to operate all of them from its Portland offices, a plan the company is considering, Saito said. He said such consolidation of radio has allowed companies nationwide to operate with fewer people, therefore reducing



Unusual operation: KMUZ-AM disc jockey Nelson Zepeda reads from a list of items for sale called by its listeners. The radio station is licensed in Gresham, Ore., operates out of a Washougal office and broadcasts in a Spanish language format that appeals mostly to pockets of Latino communities in Portland.

the cost of operation. "It allows us to become a more powerful company," he said. "We can offer advertisers better deals. ... We can go after the bigger national accounts."

Listeners benefit, Saito says, through stronger signals and higher-quality programming provided by national sources. Chris Bennett, owner of the group that operates Vancouver's KBMS, said even though his Clark County station is small, it could survive on local advertising alone. It must tap the Portland market.

"That's just the way the business is," he said. "People aren't spending that kind of money to buy stations to lose business. ... Wherever our signal hits, that's the community we serve."

FCC's diminished power

With the sweeping deregulation that began in the Reagan era and created with the Telecommunications Act of 1996, stations now are merely required to identify the city of license at the top of the hour and keep their base of operations within a 25-mile radius of that city. Such flexibility has allowed stations to essentially ignore the city of license as well as community service, opponents of the act say.

In turn, budget cuts since the 1996 act have diminished the power of the FCC. Portland's office of six agents since has closed and been replaced by two resident assistants who work out of a private office in Vancouver. Their main function is to respond to emergency calls regarding interference with frequencies. Any concern about content — or lack thereof — is handled by FCC headquarters in Washington, D.C., said Binh Nguyen, one of the local resident assistants.

"We cannot tell the stations what to do," Nguyen said. "It's up to them."

System failure?

This type of self-government doesn't seem to be working in Clark County, but Southwest Washington isn't alone, industry sources from throughout the region and nation say. Just in the Portland area, similar cases can be made in Lake Oswego, Gresham, Beaverton, Tigard and even Banks.

Banks — a town of about 800 people, about 25 miles west of Portland — has a radio station licensed to it, KBBI-FM (107.5), which many of the city's residents, including the town's mayor, did not even know about.

Banks Mayor Ray Deeth said he knew nothing about the alternative rock station — based out of downtown Portland — that is using his city's license, valued at more than \$14 million. He asked around town and couldn't find anyone else who knew about it, either.

"It's ridiculous. ... It's weird. ... It's unethical," Deeth said. "I

WHOM TO CALL

National legislators representing Clark County:

- U.S. Sen. Slade Gorton (R-Beavette)
730 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510; telephone: (202) 224-3441; fax: (202) 224-9393; e-mail: through Web page (www.senate.gov/gorton); Vancouver office: Federal Building, 500 W. 12th St., Room 130, Vancouver, WA 98660; telephone: 696-7838; fax: 696-7788.
- U.S. Sen. Patty Murray (D-Seattle)
111 Russel Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510; telephone: (202) 224-2621; fax: (202) 224-0236; e-mail: senator.murray@murray.senate.gov; Vancouver office: Federal Building, 500 W. 12th St., Room 140, Vancouver, WA 98660; telephone: 696-7737; fax: 696-7788.
- U.S. Rep. Brian Baird (D-Vancouver)
1721 Longworth HOB, Washington, D.C. 20515; telephone: (202) 225-3536; fax: (202) 225-3478; e-mail: brian.baird@mail.house.gov; Vancouver office: 1220 Main St., Suite 360, Vancouver, WA 98660; telephone 695-6292; fax: 695-6197.

■ To contact the public service department of the Federal Communications Commission, which serves as its information resource for citizens:

Write: Director Martha Conner, in care of the Federal Communications Commission, 1919 M St. Northwest, Room No. 254, Washington, D.C. 20554; call: (202) 418-0200; TTY: (202) 418-2555; e-mail: psd@fcc.gov; or visit the department's Web site: www.fcc.gov.

■ To comment about this issue on The Columbian's Web site, visit www.columbian.com.

think somehow or another we should have been notified about it as a city. ... We should at least be consulted for it or something. We're losing our voice on radio while the company is making millions."

To take the problem to other extremes: A station licensed to Gresham, KMUZ-AM (1230) operates out of Washougal and broadcasts a Spanish language format that appeals mostly to Latino communities in Portland. "This dilemma is spreading to the fringes of other metropolitan areas throughout the country," said opponents of the act. The same thing is happening in the suburbs around Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles and other big cities in America.

"It's a shame because these places ought to have their own media," says Robert Fulford, a professor of communication at the University of Portland.

"That's where a particular character of a place comes through, the local styles, the local ways of doing things. ... Without media focused on your community, you're not going to know about the possibilities it offers to make your life better and more interesting."

Dick Schwary, who owns KMUZ and was part of the groups that sold KNKR and the television station KPDX to Portland investors (see accompanying story), acknowledges that the state of the radio business may irritate or even enrage some people. But he says it comes down to simple economics: Portland can support the stations and Clark County can't.

"A city of license doesn't mean a damn thing to these stations," Schwary said. "In reality, you

have to have a certain number of paid ads or you go out of business."

Schwary said before the telecommunications act, FM stations in the Portland market were selling for between \$500,000 and \$2 million. Now they cost more than \$20 million. "FM stations were a dime a dozen before deregulation," he said. "Since then, there are only so many slots available, and it has become a matter of supply and demand."

Schwary said once these companies spend millions on a station, they want high returns. For the most part, they can't get that from local programming and local advertisers. The largest advertising accounts are regional and national, and those businesses prefer to be paired with regional and national programming with which they are familiar.

Some say this kind of system will work. "Eventually, the market will be forced to provide what the people need or don't have," Schwary said. "To survive in radio, you have to find your niche." Others, mostly those not involved in the business side of radio, disagree and think the system is flawed.

Shaheed Haamid, a volunteer program host at the advertisement-free KBQO-FM (90.7) in Portland, says radio has gotten away from community values or even listening to its communities. "It's all part of the dumbing down of our society. The media has the role of educating as well as entertaining the populace," he said. "If you're going to have music on a station for 24 hours of the day, how are you maintaining or perpetuating a value system? How are you educating the com-

KPDX television: county station in license only

By ERLEST OPPENGAARD

Any talk about the loss of electronic media in Southwest Washington has to include the sale of the area's lone television station, originally dubbed KTVX.

A group of investors formed in the early 1980s with the idea of bringing a television station to Clark County. Led by Camas resident Dick Schwary, the group applied for the FCC license with the promise that it would emphasize county news, sports and public information. Designed by the idea, local citizens and public officials enthusiastically backed the application.

"We had a lot to sell because there wasn't a station here," Schwary said. "When the FCC looked at the facility in Portland, we convinced them to think about the facts that we have a river between us, and we're in a different state."

The license was approved in 1981, but local investors immediately sold 80 percent of their interest in the station to a Sacramento-based company that built the facility in Portland and changed its name to KPDX-TV.

Radio has become part of the whole media network that corporate America is attempting to dominate. "Wilker of Americans for Radio Diversity said, 'This natural resource, our public airwaves, is being handed over to the wealthy, and we're not doing anything about it. ... This money is not being given back to the community.'"

Wilker and others say the best option for the concerned public is contacting the FCC and state and city legislators. "Otherwise, nothing will change. They will continue to get away with this, and they will continue to lower the standards of our communities," he said. "It's really important that people get involved."

One idea under discussion at the FCC is offering low-power FM stations that could serve people in the Portland area, such as neighborhoods or suburbs with local programming ranging from school news to ethnic music.

The National Association of Broadcasters is vehemently against such a proposal because it could mean loss of advertising and listeners to current station owners, but FCC Chairman William Kennard said recently about the issue, "We cannot deny opportunities to those who want to use the airwaves to speak to their communities because it might be inconvenient for those who already have those opportunities."

Wilker said anyone could start up one of these low-power stations for less than \$5,000 and bring community voices back to the radio. "Just by its nature, these stations would have to be community involved or they wouldn't work," Wilker said.

"People could broadcast meetings, city news, social news, whatever's going on around them." The FCC will take comments on this proposal until August. (More information about it is available on the department's Web site, www.fcc.gov.)

Solutions?

"To be a successful citizen in a democracy requires you to do more than just vote," communication professor Fulford said. "In order for people to participate in a meaningful way, they need to know their opportunities. Those are made available through active public communication, in print as well as broadcast. As people become aware of the politics, the recreation, the events, the arts of a community, they can partici-

of the Sacramento company's first act was to change the call letters to KPDX, using the FDX designator from the Portland International Airport. The station — now a Fox affiliate and owned by Meredith Corp. out of Des Moines, Iowa — is on Channel 49 locally, Channel 13 on cable.

Schwary says the group of investors originally intended to keep and develop the station in Clark County, but he says the group significantly underestimated the costs of such a venture. Interest rates were extremely high at the time, he says, and programming ended up costing much more than the group expected.

"We wanted a station in Vancouver," Schwary said. "But in the real world, you have to get enough advertising to pay the bills."

Leland Petrik, director of programming and promotion for the station, said his group serves all of the metropolitan area, including Clatsop County, equally, giving no special emphasis to the city of license.

"If we don't serve the whole area, no one is going to watch us," he said. "If no one is going to watch us, we're not going to do very well."

Haamid of KBQO adds, "It comes down to this: Do we want to hear a variety of voices from different communities? Well, we're headed toward one monolithic audio presentation. ... If the community won't clamor for a change, who will?"

Right now, like the mayor of Banks, no one here even seems to be aware of Clark County's dwindling access to radio. Ginger Metcalf, executive director of an industrial local group called Identical, said his group had many members had discussed the issue. City officials in Southwest Washington towns, from Vancouver to Camas, also did not know about it.

Vancouver Mayor Royce Pollard said though the issue has not been discussed by the City Council, he does think it is important enough to add to the list of future topics for review.

Limited access to radio just adds to the difficulty we have in creating an identity in our community," Pollard said. "At some point in time, someone would see the value of basing a radio station in this area. ... If we have a radio station that puts an emphasis on local stuff, it can become an outlet for advertising and public service announcements, telling people what they can do here rather than in Portland."

U.S. Rep. Brian Baird, a Democrat from Vancouver, said, "People generally don't realize how fragile local broadcasting is until, it's gone."

Listeners, as well as advertisers, who are interested in local content need to champion for it, and support stations that provide it, he said.

"There's a real concern right now about the public's ability to access local information and local news and have independent voices," Baird said. "Frankly, though, the responsibility falls to the viewers and the listeners."

Baird said the only way to make changes in such a system controlled by competition is for listeners to "vote with their ears." He compared the radio crisis to that of local retailers who are being systematically replaced by e-mails and Wal-Marts. "Listeners need to demand something of real quality," Baird said. "They need to ask themselves if the station they are watching or listening to is giving them real useful and accurate information. If not, they need to let those stations know they want something better."

Game simulates skydiving thrills

Newsway

Computerdom's first skydiving simulation enables you to vicariously experience the thrill of an adrenaline-rush sport whose growing constituency runs the gamut from teens to septuagenarians, as former President Bush demonstrated recently. Playing "Skydiver" you'll jump out of a plane at 14,000 feet, plummet earthward at 120 mph, and wait until you're only 2,000 feet from the ground before activating your virtual parachute. Real-time video demonstration basics of the sport.

Barry

Visiting the fanatical end zone was not such a bright idea

From Page D1

dered into the stadium end zone, where a group of hard-core soccer fans hang out. Going there was a bad idea for two reasons: (1) Serious soccer purists are not fond of the mascot concept, and (2) The opposing team had just scored a goal. So the mood in the hard-core zone was unhappy.

Of course P.K. the lizard did not know any of this. P.K. was just shuffling along, a big, blind, green, high-fivin' wavin' wad of fun. My first inkling of trouble came when man

stuck his face deep into my mouth opening and made a very uncomplimentary remark. Hoping to win him over via hijinks, I attempted to high-five him, but somebody grabbed me, and then somebody else yanked on my tail, and within seconds there were people all around me, shouting and grabbing and pounding on my head. It was like being inside the bass drum at a Metallica concert.

The problem with being a mascot in this situation is that you have no way to indicate distress: Your mascot face keeps right on smiling happily. But believe me, the inner lizard was scared. Fortunately, Tony and some security guards quickly came to my rescue, and the remainder of my stint as mascot went smoothly. The rest of the crowd seemed friendly, I high-fived and

waved at a lot of invisible people. I also noted one interesting fact: If you're wearing a lizard costume, and a woman walks up and stands right in front of you, you are looking through the lizard's mouth, directly at the female attributes that women are always accusing guys of looking at. You can't help it! But the woman cannot tell, because the eyeballs on your mascot head appear to be making mature eye contact with her.

I pass this fact along for you guys who are pondering a career in the giant-lizard field. My advice is, stay out of the end zone. And wear a cup.

DAVE BARRY is a humor columnist for the Miami Herald. Write to him in care of Tropic Magazine, The Miami Herald, One Herald Plaza, Miami, FL 33132.

