



# Community Broadcasting Sector Sustainability Review

## RPP FM Submission

August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024

### 1. Introduction and Context

#### About RPP FM:

- RPP FM has been a cornerstone of the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula communities since 1986, providing local news, cultural programming, and community services. Despite its significant contributions, RPP FM faces systemic challenges that threaten its sustainability, particularly from the CBAA and the broader funding and regulatory environment and the fast moving media landscape.

### 2. Legislative Challenges and Recommendations

#### Regulatory Burdens:

- The restrictive broadcast regulatory framework limits RPP FM's ability to improve revenue streams as funding is tied to the FM licence. Legislative reforms are essential to alleviate these burdens, particularly by increasing the allowable sponsorship content and simplifying compliance requirements for smaller stations.

### 3. Funding Inequities and Financial Sustainability

#### Challenges with the CBAA:

- **Membership Costs and Discrimination:**  
As a sub metro station, RPP FM needs the protection and support of an umbrella organisation like the CBAA. However, such is our financial position and limited income we cannot afford CBAA membership. As a consequence, we have experienced direct discrimination from the CBAA due to our non-membership status. Despite being a vital community voice, RPP FM has been stymied by exorbitant membership fees that are disproportionate to our financial capacity. This exclusion from the CBAA has hindered our ability to participate fully in national discussions and initiatives that shape the community broadcasting landscape.
- **Dismissal of RPP FM's Efforts:**  
The CBAA has consistently dismissed the efforts of RPP FM's news team,

undermining our contributions to local and national journalism. As an example, during the recent Dunkle by-election we offered the CBAA sanctioned news service, RPP interviews with the Prime Minister and Leader of the opposition – when both men campaigning in our area. Our offer was not considered because of our non-financial status. This dismissive attitude is emblematic of a broader issue where the contributions of sub-metro stations are undervalued compared to other favoured counterparts, despite the critical role we play in our communities.

- **Call for Funding Reform:**

We subscribe to and fully appreciate the CBF grants funding model. The CBF funding staff are approachable, fair minded and always on call. Without the grants we could not survive. However, we find aspects of the grant system onerous, cumbersome and deaf to ideas that do not excite well-meaning assessors.

We feel that a panel of review could be established – comprising industry experts that could better adjudicate some of the grant ideas.

We believe the funding model should be reformed to ensure that all stations, have equitable and ongoing access to resources for multiple years and continuous funding streams.

Presently we are dependent on the success or otherwise of our Grant application.

We are particularly aggrieved that in difficult funding years – the broad underrepresented sector suffers, whereas the CBAA and a clutch of consistently funded stations and interests are seemingly immune.

We aspire to be self-funded.

## 4. Technological Transition and Digital Strategy

### **Digital Transformation Challenges:**

- RPP FM anticipates being disproportionately affected by the costs associated with transitioning to digital platforms like DAB+. The lack of targeted support for sub-metro stations in this transition has left us at a significant disadvantage, unlikely to be able to compete with better-funded metropolitan stations and unable to fund the transition from our limited financial resources. Nor are our interests being championed by the CBAA.
- As digital platforms increasingly dictate community media through algorithms that favour larger, more commercially viable content, RPP FM and similar stations find themselves marginalized. To counter this trend, it is crucial to ensure that all community broadcasters have equitable access to digital platforms and that their content is given fair visibility.

## 5. The Way Forward

### Empowering Local Voices:

- RPP FM's challenges reflect broader systemic issues within the community broadcasting sector. Beyond the obstacles posed by the CBAA, there are significant impediments that hinder the growth and sustainability of sub-metro stations like RPP FM:
- **Decline in Volunteerism:** The sector is witnessing a decline in volunteerism, historically the backbone of community radio. This trend is particularly troubling for smaller stations that rely heavily on volunteers for daily operations. The diminishing volunteer base exacerbates operational challenges, making it difficult to sustain the quality and diversity of programming.
- **Decline of the FM Spectrum:** As digital platforms gain prominence; the relevance and utility of the FM spectrum is rapidly diminishing. This decline poses a threat to stations like RPP FM, which have traditionally relied on FM broadcasting to reach their audience. Without adequate support for digital transition, these stations risk losing their audience to more digitally savvy competitors.
- **Lack of Assistance from the CBAA:** Despite being the umbrella organization for the sector, as a non-member the CBAA has provided little to no assistance to RPP FM. This lack of support is particularly glaring in areas like training, advocacy, and access to resources. The absence of CBAA's backing has left RPP FM to navigate these challenges largely on its own, further straining our limited resources.
- **Increasingly Competitive Media Landscape:** The demand for high-quality radio and media products is growing, with audiences becoming more discriminating and spoiled for choice. RPP FM must compete across new platforms but also with commercial and digital operators offering a wide range of content. This competitive landscape requires RPP FM to continuously innovate and maintain high standards of programming to retain and grow its audience, which brings us back to the lack of funding for alternative media opportunities outside the FM spectrum.
- **Need for Professional Management Structures:** In this increasingly competitive environment, there is a pressing need for ongoing management funding models that can support the transition to a professional or semi-professional management structure. Volunteer-driven models, while valuable, are no longer sufficient to meet the demands of modern media markets. Sustainable funding models are essential to underwrite the costs associated with hiring and retaining skilled staff, ensuring the station's long-term viability and success.

## 6. Response to the CBAA 'Roadmap 2033'

As we navigate our way through an increasingly disturbed media world – we have glimpsed a possible future detailed by the CBAA, we would like to make the following observations:

RPP FM's challenges reflect broader systemic issues within the community broadcasting sector, many of which are inadequately addressed in the CBAA's "Roadmap 2033" strategy.

While the roadmap sets out ambitious goals for the sector, it fails to provide the specific, actionable steps needed to achieve these goals, especially for sub-metro stations like ours.

For a station like RPP FM, which is not a CBAA member we will be excluded from its deliberations and aspirations.

The strategy's over-reliance on collaboration without clear frameworks, insufficient focus on the unique challenges faced by smaller stations, and the assumption that all stations can seamlessly transition to digital platforms are significant weaknesses.

RPP FM has experienced firsthand the exclusionary practices of the CBAA, which, combined with the lack of tailored support in the roadmap, leaves us isolated and struggling to navigate an increasingly competitive media landscape.

Moreover, the roadmap's optimistic outlook does not sufficiently address the real risks we face, such as the decline in volunteerism, the diminishing relevance of the FM spectrum, and the need for ongoing management funding models that can support a professional or semi-professional management structure.

The absence of contingency planning and the vague legislative advocacy efforts further weaken the roadmap's effectiveness, making it difficult for stations like RPP FM to thrive in the long term.

Equally there was not a detailed discussion about the impact of new technology, AI and how digital media is impacting the sector, providing both hazards and opportunities

## 7. Final Appeal

The future of community broadcasting in Australia depends on empowering stations like RPP FM.

It also requires the leadership and support of a powerful and invested umbrella organisation.

Addressing the inequities in funding, reforming restrictive legislative frameworks, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and supporting the digital transition for all stations will ensure that local voices continue to thrive in an increasingly algorithm-driven media landscape.

Additionally, the sector must acknowledge the need for professional management and provide the necessary funding to support this evolution, ensuring that community stations remain competitive and relevant in the face of growing media demands.

If the government does not move to act and reform, the sector is doomed.

At a time when increasingly, the community voice is being defined on social media platforms, we believe community radio and its affiliated digital services can hold sway and help define and moderate the cacophony.

Without a powerful community broadcasting sector our society will be increasingly defined and corralled by algorithms designed in California, while lining the pockets of billionaires.

A strong community broadcast sector allows us to define our voice and promote our conversations.

**Brendon Telfer**  
**Manager**  
**RPP FM**

