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5 TV licenses challenged by rights groups

By Terry FitzPatrick

AMARILLO — Two civil rights groups have challenged the broadcast licenses of five Texas television stations, claiming that the stations don't hire enough minorities and don't have adequate programs to increase minority employment.

Local chapters of the NAACP, working with the National Black Media Coalition, filed formal petitions last week to deny the license re-

■ Concerns in Dallas. 18A

newals of KTAB in Abilene, KAMR and KVII in Amarillo, and KAVU and KVCT in Victoria.

"For those particular stations, we want the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) to do investigations to determine whether they have engaged in discrimination," said David Honig, a Maryland lawyer working for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The civil rights group also filed an "informal objection" to the license renewal of KLBK in Lubbock, but did not ask federal regulators to deny renewal, because the station is changing ownership.

All of Texas' 115 full-power television stations are up for license renewal this year. Honig reviewed minority employment forms that each station filed with its application.

"We have no particular cases where a person says, 'I've been discriminated against,'" Honig said Thursday. "You can infer from statistics that someone is discriminating if the statistics are so outrageous."

Station managers in Amarillo and Abilene were surprised by the civil rights action against them.

"We're happy to hire anyone who is able to work," said Ray Poindexter, vice president and general manager at KAMR in Amarillo. "We have a higher percentage of minorities than we had at the last (license) filing."

Wayne Roy, general manager of Abilene's KTAB, was unaware that his license renewal application was being challenged on racial grounds. "We're within FCC compliance," Roy said.

FCC and broadcast industry lawyers say equal employment opportunity standards have changed during the past few years.

Generally, the FCC has required that the percentage of minority workers employed at a station be at least half the percentage of the minority population in the city that station serves.

In recent years, however, the commission has gone beyond those standards to see how well a station has recruited minority job applicants.

The NAACP has been reviewing license-renewal applications on a state-by-state basis since 1981, Honig said.

"Generally, half the stations that they picked out have, in the view of the commission, warranted some action of one kind or another," said James Shook, an FCC attorney. Please see CIVIL on Page 21A.

Civil rights groups challenge TV licenses

Continued from Page 17A.

who supervises the equal employment opportunity office.

The FCC has never denied a television license renewal based solely on minority employment, Shook said. When a problem is found, the commission usually requires a broadcaster to file frequent hiring reports and improve relations with minority organizations in the community.

"The licensees aren't real thrilled about having to do something like this, but it is a normal condition that the commission imposes if the EEO (equal employment opportunity) performance isn't up to snuff," Shook said.

Each of the stations named in the NAACP petition has 30 days to respond to the allegation. The civil rights group then has a chance for rebuttal. The FCC will then review the legal briefs and decide if the stations need to improve minority hiring to keep their licenses.

Terry FitzPatrick is a journalist based in Amarillo.