

A vintage silver microphone with a black grille and a black body, set against a blurred orange background. The microphone is positioned vertically, with the grille at the top and the body extending downwards. The background is a warm, orange-toned, out-of-focus pattern that resembles a stylized 'E' or a similar geometric shape.

Purchase and Sale of Broadcast Stations

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Considerations Unique to the Purchase and Sale of Broadcast Stations

The acquisition of a broadcast station is not like the acquisition of a newspaper or an internet site, which can take place as soon as the financing is arranged and the legal papers are drawn up. The time between signing an agreement for the sale of a broadcast station and the station actually changing hands can take six months to a year, and in some cases even longer. Ownership or control of a broadcast station cannot be transferred until the Federal Communications Commission (“FCC” or “Commission”) consents to an assignment of license or transfer of control of the licensee. This article focuses on the special challenges resulting from the acquisition and sale of a broadcast station, a highly regulated business. It provides information on all aspects of the process of acquiring a broadcast station from the letter of intent and the due diligence process to the closing. For those unfamiliar with FCC regulation, the article provides a short course on FCC rules and policies governing broadcast stations. It also is designed to decode the mysteries of broadcast station purchase and sale contracts and present the most innovative contract strategies in today’s marketplace.

I. To Write or Not to Write: The Tortuous Letter of Intent

After the buyer and seller have worked out the basic terms of their deal for a broadcast station, a letter of intent serves to memorialize those terms in anticipation of the formal agreement.

While generally intended to be non-binding, a letter of intent states the parties’ intention to enter into a transaction and recites the basic business points (e.g., purchase price, timetable, form of consideration), thereby helping to move the deal along. Unfortunately, parties too often

enter into letters of intent without a great deal of thought. Indeed, in some radio transactions, the letter of intent—referred to as a “Memorandum of Understanding” or “Agreement in Principle”—is drafted by the broker using a fill-in-the-blanks boilerplate letter. In contrast, in other situations, the letter of intent is drafted—and redrafted—by multiple lawyers and can become the subject of seemingly endless negotiations between the parties. One of the benefits of a well-drafted and negotiated letter of intent is that it can make the negotiation of the definitive agreement speedier and easier.

Inattention to the consequences of a letter of intent can be costly. In one dramatic case for example—the proposed acquisition of Getty Oil by Pennzoil—the letter of intent formed the basis of a jury award of \$11.2 billion.¹

Typically, a letter of intent takes the form of a letter addressed to the seller, signed by the buyer, and then countersigned and dated by the seller or, in the case of a sale of stock, by the selling shareholders. When there are large numbers of shareholders, it is desirable to have the letter of intent countersigned by the principal shareholders. If any trouble is anticipated from minority shareholders, the buyer would be well advised to obtain their signatures as well.

Many letters of intent state that the definitive agreement will contain such representations, warranties, covenants and indemnification provisions as are customary and appropriate to transactions of similar size and nature. Some letters include specific representations and warranties about various matters, such as the condition of equipment and compliance with the Commission’s rules. Other letters deal with such subjects as the allocation of the purchase price for tax and accounting purposes, responsibility for payment of fees, expenses and taxes, covenants concerning the conduct of business before the closing, and the need for a “final order” issued by the FCC consenting to the sale.

¹ See *Texaco Inc. v. Pennzoil Co.*, 729 S.W.2d 768 (Tex. Ct. App. 1987).

The more points covered, the more a letter of intent begins to look like a blueprint for a formal agreement, which raises the question of whether it would have been more efficient to have proceeded to a definitive agreement to begin with. Nevertheless, a comprehensive letter of intent might save time, or it could serve as a red flag to all parties if it appears that fundamental issues cannot be resolved—a clear signal that more time will be needed to reach a definitive agreement.

II. Two Sides to the Puzzle: The Purchase and Sale Agreement²

Samuel Goldwyn allegedly quipped “an oral contract isn’t worth the paper on which it is written.” He might have said that a written contract is of similar value if its provisions do not accurately reflect the understandings of the parties, to avoid disputes and litigation.

As with any acquisition, a radio station purchase can be structured in one of two ways: (1) the buyer can acquire the assets of the seller’s business; or (2) the buyer can acquire the stock (or other equity investment) of the seller’s business. Which structure the parties select will often depend on the tax consequences of one structure versus the other. Tax implications (e.g., available net operating losses, recapture of depreciation, investment credits) can have a significant impact on the costs and value of the transaction to each of the parties. For this reason, it is advisable that both the seller and the buyer obtain tax advice very early in the process. Tax consequences aside, the distinction between a stock transaction and an asset deal can be important for other reasons as well.

In a stock transaction, the purchaser acquires an ownership interest in the stock of the existing corporate owner of the radio station from one or more of its shareholders and, accordingly, acquires an interest in all of the liabilities of the corporation (whether or not they are disclosed) as well as all of the assets. Although our references are to stock purchase

² This and other discussions of contract language and transactional dealings are based upon the authors’ collective practice and experience.

agreements involving the purchase of the stock of a corporation, similar considerations may apply if the acquired entity is a partnership or a limited liability company taxed as a partnership. Stock acquisitions can be advantageous from an operations standpoint, because they preserve some continuity with a station's existing vendors, lease arrangements, and the like. In a stock deal, however, the seller customarily has a tax liability on the difference between its adjusted basis in the stock and the stock price paid by the buyer. Sellers generally prefer a Stock Purchase Agreement because it (a) avoids "double taxation" (i.e., taxes on the corporation and on the shareholder(s)); (b) potentially reduces the amount of taxes, because the transaction generally is taxed at capital gains rates which are lower than ordinary income tax rates; and (c) allows the shareholders to step away completely from the business.

In an asset deal, the buyer acquires only those assets, including contracts, specifically negotiated to be sold and specified in the purchase agreement. The buyer generally does not acquire assets other than the assumed contracts or any of the seller's liabilities. Although accounts receivable are not usually retained by the seller, the buyer will try to acquire the receivables at the expense of a higher purchase price or the assumption of trade liability, to establish an immediate cash flow. Typically, asset purchases have more favorable tax implications for the buyer, particularly if the seller's station is a relatively new one that was built, rather than purchased, by the seller. The vast majority of radio station transactions are asset sales rather than stock deals. Accordingly, we focus primarily on the instrument used to memorialize such transactions: the asset purchase agreement. Though each asset purchase agreement must be tailored to meet the needs of the parties to the transaction, we discuss provisions typically found in an agreement for the sale and purchase of the assets of a radio station.

It is possible to structure the transaction as tax-free, in whole or in part, to the seller either through a tax-free reorganization in the case of using buyer's stock as consideration or a simultaneous or deferred

exchange of radio stations. The liberalization of the FCC's multiple ownership rules in the 1990s and the significant appreciation in value of some stations prompted many sellers at that time to defer their income tax liability by conducting exchanges under Section 1031 of the Internal Revenue Code.³ The use of buyer's stock in a tax-deferred exchange also raises multiple federal securities issues, in particular the need to register the stock under the Securities Act of 1933 or to come within an exemption from the registration requirement.

Agreements come in all shapes and sizes. More text is not necessarily better. A lengthy contract provides no assurance that it will protect the parties or minimize the chances of litigation. Agreements also differ stylistically. For example, some contracts contain a special section devoted to "definitions" (i.e., defining the major terms used in the agreement), while others include "definitions" within the pertinent sections. In any form, a well-drafted agreement satisfies the expectations of both parties.

Purchase agreements do not make for exciting reading; however, they play an important, indeed central, role in effectuating the purchase and sale of a station. Signatories should know and understand all of their provisions. Here is a section-by-section overview of some of the most common provisions in purchase agreements.

A. Inside: The Assets to be Purchased

An experienced buyer of radio properties knows the importance of identifying in the contract all of the assets of the station that will be necessary or useful to the successful operation of the facilities. Customarily, this is achieved by a general recitation that the buyer is acquiring "all of the tangible and intangible assets owned by Seller and used or useful in connection with the operation of the station," with the exception of any excluded assets separately identified elsewhere

³ See generally 47 C.F.R. § 73.3555 (multiple ownership rules).

in the agreement. This general recitation is often accompanied by an enumeration of some of the specific assets being purchased (which is included “without limitation” of the general statement that “all” assets are being acquired).

A list of assets typically includes a description of: (1) the physical assets (tangible personal property) associated with the station (e.g., towers, transmitters, studio equipment, furnishings etc.); (2) contracts, leases and other agreements to be assigned (often with a special provision for trade or barter agreements); (3) a description of any real property to be transferred; and (4) any intellectual property (e.g., copyrights, trademarks, call letters, domain names and registrations, logos, slogans, rights to the content of websites and all good will associated with such intellectual property, etc.). The detailed description of the specific assets to be sold is usually contained in schedules attached to and made a part of the agreement. Most schedules describe the real property, the inventory (or tangible personal property), the FCC licenses, intangible personal property (such as copyrights and trademarks), and the contracts, leases and other agreements that the buyer agrees to assume.

Customarily, the purchase agreement will provide that the seller assign to the buyer all station contracts that deal with the operation of the station. In some instances, however, those agreements may not have been reduced to writing or may be in the process of being renegotiated while the buyer and seller are negotiating the purchase agreement. Under those circumstances, the buyer may not be able to assess accurately either the potential benefits or the potential liabilities of those agreements that the buyer would be assuming. One solution to this problem is to permit the seller to conclude its negotiations after the execution of the purchase agreement while adjusting the purchase price at closing based upon the results of those negotiations. For example, if one of the parties agreed that if the new tower lease into which the seller was entering resulted in net rental income that was less than a predetermined amount set forth in the asset purchase agreement, then the purchase price would be decreased by

the present value of the difference between that predetermined amount and the net rental income that would be realized during the term of the renewed lease.

In addition to the foregoing considerations, the growth of the Internet has necessitated further expansion of the asset list. Most radio stations in the U.S. maintain a presence on the Internet, and many of these are also using the Internet as a medium for their broadcast content. In this environment, a prudent buyer cannot ignore the need to include the “e”-assets of the station when drafting the contract for the purchase of a radio station.

At a minimum, website assets that need to be considered include web hosting agreements, domain name registrations, service provider agreements for website components, including audio streaming and third-party video content (e.g., news, weather, traffic), and related e-commerce agreements. Although copyright licenses for streaming are not assignable (a buyer must obtain its own), the records of the seller’s performance royalty payments to SoundExchange should be included as assets, to enable the buyer to respond to a claim of copyright infringement for any period prior to closing.⁴

Two contrasting approaches to this issue can be found in two agreements. In the first agreement, the buyer obtained a broad clause in the recitation of assets to be acquired that encompassed:

All Domain leases and Domain names of the Station, the unrestricted right to use of HTML content located and publicly accessible from those Domain names, and the “visitor” email database for those sites.

This type of provision would appear to afford the buyer solid general protection for the most desirable e-commerce assets of the station. It is not tailored, however, to address any particular concerns

⁴ SoundExchange is an independent, non-profit performance rights organization that collects royalties on behalf of sound recording copyright owners and artists for non-interactive digital transmissions. SOUNDEXCHANGE, <http://www.soundexchange.com>.

that the buyer or the seller may possess with respect to the assets, such as any limits restricting the seller's ability to convey its interest or any collateral obligations or commitments related to the assets that may have to be assigned and assumed in connection with the transfer. Nor does the general language above protect the seller from possibly giving away too much. By contrast, a similar provision in another agreement does address such issues. In that deal, the parties provided specifically that assets encompassed by the purchase and sale would include:

All of the Seller's rights in and to, to the extent assignable and to the extent relating primarily to the Stations, any Internet Domain Name, any Internet Web page, the content accessible therefrom and the visitor data collected; provided, however, that any contract related thereto constitutes an Assumed Contract.

While neither of these provisions defines the appropriate scope of such an Internet assets provision, they do evidence that the subject is one that warrants careful consideration by both sides, and careful attention to drafting by counsel.

Customarily, the seller will retain the accounts receivable and any amounts to which the station might be entitled as a result of station operations prior to the closing date. Even if the agreement provides that the buyer will collect the accounts receivable, those collections and any receipts for amounts owed to the station as a result of operations prior to the closing usually are turned over to the seller. This is not always the case, however. For example, in one agreement, the parties provided that, among the assets to be sold to the buyer were "all accounts receivable and all amounts payable to the station, if any, from the United States Copyright Office or such arbitral panels as may be appointed by the United States Copyright Office that relate to the period" prior to the closing. Although the provision is unusual, its use can make sense in a situation where the seller is trying to wrap up affairs. In return for a fixed increase in the price paid to it at closing and the ability to close out its operations sooner

than might otherwise be the case, the seller foregoes the uncertain future income it would have received from the collection of accounts receivable and possible future payments from the Copyright Office.

B. Outside: The Assets Excluded from the Transaction

The agreement must also describe the assets that are not to be purchased. Assets ordinarily excluded and, therefore, retained by the seller, include:

- Cash or cash equivalents (e.g., certificates of deposit or Treasury bills).
- Accounts receivable.
- Any contracts, agreements and leases other than the agreements specifically assumed by the buyer.
- Any rights to refunds of federal, state or local franchise, income or other taxes or fees arising out of activities occurring prior to the closing date.
- Life insurance (and its cash surrender value).
- Security deposits paid to utility companies or other parties.
- Seller's corporate records, except records pertaining to or used in the operation of the station.
- Any pension, profit sharing or employee benefit plans.
- Trade deals, in some instances.
- Some sellers include the call signs of the station as excluded assets. This can be important if the seller has other radio properties that it will continue to operate following the sale and wants to be able to use the call sign on one of them. In such cases, the agreement customarily requires the buyer to submit the proper request to the FCC for authority to change the call letters of the station effective on the closing date.

C. How Much: How and When

One section of a purchase agreement deals with the consideration to be paid for the acquisition. The agreement usually lists the aggregate amount of the purchase price. The purchase price can be based on a formula (for example, as a multiple of broadcast cash flow). If non-competition or consulting agreements are involved, the section may also indicate the amount of money allocated to these agreements. In the past, buyers often preferred to earmark a portion of the purchase price to such agreements in order to take advantage of more favorable tax treatment; payments pursuant to non-competition and consulting agreements can be treated by the buyer as a deductible expense. However, this is no longer the case, because non-competition expenses are now deductible over a 15-year period (not the duration of the covenant or the payment period) under Section 197 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended, and thus are, for tax purposes, the same as goodwill.⁵

The section on purchase price usually discusses whether there is an “earnest money” escrow deposit. In most transactions, the escrow fund serves as an assured funding mechanism for the payment of “liquidated damages” to the seller in the event of a breach of contract or default by the buyer.⁶ Typically the amount of the escrow deposit is 5% of the purchase price, although the seller may insist on an escrow deposit approaching 10% if the buyer does not have an established track record of closing on its purchases. The escrow payment might be in the form of cash or an irrevocable letter of credit. The cash or letter of credit is deposited with a financial institution, the broker, or counsel pursuant to a negotiated escrow agreement. Escrow agreements usually specify who pays any fees of the escrow agent (typically shared by seller and buyer), who receives any interest on escrowed funds, procedures for third party

⁵ See I.R.C. § 197 (2006).

⁶ “Liquidated” damages are the amount of damages that a party who breaches a contract is required to pay without reference to the actual injury suffered by the non-breaching party.

claims, and the manner in which funds shall be paid. A form of escrow agreement usually is included in the purchase agreement as an exhibit.

A purchase price section also spells out how the buyer is to make payment at the closing. The cash portion of the purchase price is usually paid by wire transfer. If part or all of the purchase price is to be deferred, or financed by the seller, a brief description of the terms of the “seller paper” is typically included, accompanied by a promissory note attached as an exhibit to be executed by the buyer at the closing. In most transactions involving seller financing, a prudent seller also will request that the buyer execute one or more financing instruments (e.g., a security agreement, stock pledge agreement, and guaranty agreement(s)). Most buyers will negotiate for a provision which subordinates seller financing to bank debt. The seller often obtains a “security interest” in the assets of the station (most often junior in position to a similar right given to the buyer’s senior lender). A security interest is a legal interest in property that secures the payment of a debt or other obligation by giving the creditor the right to sell the property to satisfy the debt, and establishes certain priorities to the property among creditors. The Commission prohibits any provision that provides for a security interest in FCC licenses and permits.⁷ For a more complete discussion, see Section IV. Like the promissory note, forms of such financing instruments are usually included as exhibits.

D. Assumption by the Buyer of Specified Liabilities and Obligations

This section makes provisions for the assumption of liabilities and obligations by the buyer and the seller. Principally, the buyer assumes contracts, leases, and agreements, which are customarily listed separately in a schedule to the agreement. Some contracts are designated as material contracts for which consent to assignment must be obtained from the contracting party as a condition to closing. The seller usually remains

⁷ See *Merkley*, 94 F.C.C. 2d 829, 831 (1983), *aff’d*, 776 F.2d 365 (D.C. Cir. 1985).

liable for all liabilities and obligations accruing or occurring prior to the closing (including obligations arising under assumed contracts, leases and agreements), as well as for any contract, lease or agreement not included in the schedule of contracts to be assumed by the buyer.

It is not uncommon for some of the more important agreements being assumed by the buyer to require the consent of a third party. Customarily, the purchase agreement will require the seller to use “all commercially reasonable efforts to obtain any and all such third party consents.” To avoid the situation where the third party seeks a monetary payment in return for granting such consent, the parties to one agreement inserted a clause that “the Seller shall use all commercially reasonable efforts to obtain any and all such third party consents . . . provided, however, that the Seller shall not be required to pay or incur any cost or expense, other than routine and reasonable administrative costs, to obtain any third party consent that the Seller is not otherwise required to pay or incur in accordance with the terms of the applicable Business Contract or Business License.” The parties to that agreement also sought to deal with a situation wherein the third party might refuse to grant its consent, by providing that “if any such third party consent is not obtained before the Closing, the Seller shall, at the Purchaser’s request, cooperate with the Purchaser in any reasonable arrangement designed to provide to the Purchaser after the Closing the benefits under the applicable Business Contract or Business License.”

E. Closing

This section specifies the date, time and place of the closing and sets forth the conditions for the closing, including the need for FCC approval and other governmental or third party consents.

F. Representations and Warranties by the Parties

The “reps and warranties” portion of an agreement consists of promises or statements about the parties’ respective status and their

authority to perform the obligations under the agreement, as well as the nature or quality of what the seller is selling and the buyer is buying. The section describing the representations and warranties of the seller usually comprises the most extensive portion of the agreement, since it is designed to protect the buyer from unpleasant surprises at (and after) the closing. Often a purchase agreement will provide that a breach of a representation or warranty will trigger the non-breaching party's right to indemnification (i.e., to be made whole) for any damages that result from the breach.

There are certain steps that a diligent buyer can take to minimize the risk of getting less than it bargained for. First, the buyer must be scrupulous in performing its due diligence. The FCC records should be checked and, more importantly, a qualified engineer should be retained to perform a due diligence inspection of the station. The engineering due diligence inspection would include an inspection not only of the transmission and studio equipment, but also an on-the-ground review of station operations. AM directional stations and community sites with multiple antennas, because of potential radiofrequency radiation ("RF") issues, bear special technical scrutiny and expertise. It is not uncommon for stations that are in receivership or bankruptcy to have been poorly operated and to have been subjected to slipshod maintenance. The engineer must visit the transmitter site and make sure that it is properly fenced and bears all requisite signage warning of RF and high voltage dangers and informing visitors of the FCC antenna structure registration number that has been accorded to the facility. No on-site transmitter site inspection can be considered to be complete without a confirmation that the transmitter site is located at the correct coordinates. It is all too common for an on site inspection to disclose that a station's transmitter site is not accurately reflected on the station's license. That is particularly true in the case of stations that have spent their existence at the cusp of receivership or bankruptcy. In addition to performing a rigorous due diligence inspection, the buyer should also insist upon a holdback

escrow so that if problems are discovered with the station after the closing, the buyer has a ready source of funds that can be used to remedy the situation.

It is not always possible to negotiate an agreement, however, that provides for a holdback escrow in a receivership or bankruptcy context. Under those circumstances, the buyer has no choice but to weigh the potential for problems with the station against the reduced purchase price that the buyer should be able to negotiate for the station. If the price of the station is low enough, it may make sense for the buyer to take the risk and purchase the station, especially if the chances of uncovering significant liabilities associated with the station are slim. A recently constructed FM station using rented facilities likely carries far fewer risks for a buyer than an AM station that owns real property with a transmitter site that has been in use since before PCBs were essentially outlawed.⁸

G. Conditions to the Buyer's Obligation to Close

This section sets forth the conditions that typically must be satisfied before the buyer will be required to close. Such conditions usually include:

- Seller is in compliance with its covenants, representations and warranties.
- Approval as to form and substance of instruments to be delivered to the buyer at closing (i.e., the closing documents, including the purchase agreements and any related documents or agreements such as evidence of FCC consent, etc.).

⁸ PCBs or Polychlorinated Biphenyls, are regulated by The Toxic Substances Control Act in 15 U.S.C. § 2605, enacted on October 11, 1976. The Act authorizes the Environmental Protection Agency to secure information on all new and existing chemical substances, as well as to control any of the substances that were determined to cause unreasonable risk to public health or the environment. The production of PCBs is currently banned in the United States. 40 C.F.R. § 761 (2009).

- Legal opinion of the seller's counsel has been received.
- The FCC has issued consent to the assignment of license or transfer of control, and the consent has become a Final Order.
- All necessary third party consents to the assignment of contracts, leases, etc. to the buyer have been obtained.
- No legal proceedings that would affect the transaction or impair the value of the assets are pending or threatened.
- FCC Licenses are in good standing.
- Assets are being transferred free and clear.
- There has been no material adverse change in the assets, business or prospects of the station.

H. Conditions to the Seller's Obligation to Close

This section, like the one discussed above, sets forth the conditions under which the seller will be required to close. Though shorter than the list of conditions that qualify a buyer's obligation, the seller's list contains several of the same elements, such as:

- Buyer shall have paid the purchase price.
- Buyer is in compliance with its covenants, representations and warranties.
- The FCC has issued consent to the assignment of license or transfer of control, and the consent has become a Final Order.⁹
- Approval as to form and substance of instruments that will be delivered to the seller at the closing.
- Legal opinion of the buyer's counsel has been received.

⁹ For a definition of Final Order, see *infra* at Section IV(A).

I. Risk of Loss

Unless otherwise specifically negotiated, this section makes clear that the seller bears the risk of any loss, damage, or impairment of any of the assets that takes place prior to the closing. It usually obligates the seller to replace, repair, or restore such assets to their prior condition as soon as possible. This provision might provide representations concerning casualty insurance and specifically require the seller to assume the risk for all deductibles.

J. Termination or Breach

This section discusses the rights of the buyer and the seller to terminate the agreement, as a matter of right or due to breach or default by the other party. There are usually different provisions in this section depending on whether the termination or breach of contract is caused by the seller's breach or default, the buyer's breach or default, or events beyond the control of either party, such as the FCC's failure to grant consent. Termination is usually effected after the provision of written notice (usually 30 days), which gives the breaching party an opportunity to cure the breach. Some agreements specify a fixed, pre-determined amount as liquidated damages, which the buyer must pay to the seller in the event buyer fails to close. Generally, the courts will uphold the amount agreed upon by the parties as liquidated damages if they are a reasonable estimate of the actual damages that the parties could suffer in the future.¹⁰

The "earnest money escrow deposit" usually serves as an available liquid asset pool to secure the payment of at least a portion of the liquidated damages for the seller. One contract contained the following provision detailing the basis of liquidated damages:

The Buyer and the Seller acknowledge that in the event that the transactions contemplated by this Agreement are

¹⁰ Arthur L. Corbin, 11 Corbin on Contracts § 58.1 (Joseph M. Perillo ed. 2010).

not closed because of a default by the Buyer, the Adverse Consequences to the Seller as a result of such default may be difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain. Accordingly, in lieu of indemnification pursuant to Section 7(c), the Seller shall be entitled to receive from the defaulting Party for such default the Earnest Money Deposit as liquidated damages without the need for proof of damages, subject only to successfully proving in a court of competent jurisdiction that the Buyer materially breached this Agreement and that the transactions contemplated thereby have not occurred. The Seller shall proceed against the Earnest Money Deposit as full satisfaction of liquidated damages owed by the Buyer and as its sole remedy for a failure of the transactions contemplated hereby to occur as a result of a material breach of the terms of this Agreement by the Buyer.

The liquidated damages provision may not pass court muster unless the damages resulting from a breach are incapable or difficult to estimate and the stipulation of damages in the provision is a reasonable forecast of just compensation.

Most agreements include a specific performance clause that entitles the buyer to obtain a judicial order requiring the seller to sell the station to the buyer in the event of breach or default by the seller. Such clauses usually contain a statement that the seller stipulates that the assets include unique property that cannot be readily obtained on the open market and that the buyer will be irreparably injured if the Asset Purchase Agreement is not specifically enforced. In addition, there is typically a provision that the seller agrees to waive the defense in any lawsuit that buyer has an adequate remedy at law and to interpose no objection to the propriety of specific performance as a remedy. Because of the many variables that can delay the grant of an application by the FCC (e.g., the

filing of a petition to deny or an informal objection), many agreements provide for a contract expiration date (typically nine months to one year from the filing of the application) and permit either party to withdraw if the Commission designates the application for a hearing, regardless of the timing.

K. Survival of Representations and Warranties

This section specifies the period of time that the representations and warranties of the buyer and the seller will remain effective beyond the closing. This is an important issue for both the seller and the buyer. There is a natural tension between the parties on the survival period.

From the point of view of the buyer, the seller's representations and warranties should survive the closing to the extent of the applicable statute(s) of limitations. The seller, by contrast, generally wants to limit the length of time that its representations and warranties will remain effective. A lengthy survival period may mean that the seller (or its business entity) will be required to remain in existence longer than the seller's principals wish. In fact, the buyer may insist that the purchase agreement include a provision requiring that the seller remain in existence until the expiration of the survival period to help ensure that the seller will be available and able to stand behind its representations and warranties.

Various approaches can resolve the tension and determine the survival period of representations and warranties. Typically, the parties will agree on a fixed period of time within which the representations and warranties survive, after which no claims can be made for breach. The shortest typical deadline is generally six months after the closing. Two years is typical of the longest deadline, with certain representations (such as those for taxes, environmental liabilities, title, fees to brokers, and the Employee Retirement Income Security Act ("ERISA") continuing through the applicable statute of limitations. Some agreements provide

that the representations and warranties will survive for one audit period (typically not more than 18 months). The deadlines may vary depending on the nature of the warranty. There may be several categories into which warranties are allocated. For example, some agreements provide for no time limitation on the representations of the seller concerning its authority to engage in the transaction or its title to the real estate. In some instances, the purchase agreement places no limitations on survival:

All representations, warranties, covenants and agreements contained in this Agreement, or in any certificate, agreement, or other document or instrument, delivered pursuant hereto, shall survive (and not be affected in any respect by) the Closing, any investigation conducted by any party hereto and any information which any party may receive.

L. Indemnification by the Buyer and the Seller

This section describes the procedures and the limitations for indemnification in the event of a breach of contract. (“Indemnification” refers to the obligation to reimburse a party for all or some part of the expenses and damages sustained). The indemnification section typically requires the seller (and sometimes, its shareholders and principals) to indemnify the buyer not only for breaches of warranties, representations and covenants but also for other kinds of claims (such as tax or environmental liabilities) that may occur after the closing but were not assumed by the buyer. In some transactions, the indemnification obligation is secured with an escrow of a portion of the purchase price or an offset of payments relating to a non-competition agreement or a promissory note. Also, the indemnification section creates liability for the seller after the date of the closing even for matters that the seller had no knowledge of before the closing. For example, a typical indemnification clause may require the seller to indemnify the buyer from any post-closing claim resulting from a pre-closing “act, omission or event.”

Some clauses provide for unlimited indemnification, but must be qualified by a number of requirements. Other indemnification provisions specify a “cap” or maximum amount of coverage, an amount that frequently equals the total purchase price. Others provide for a safety net or “basket,” which is a minimum amount of loss that the indemnified party must exceed before the obligation of the “indemnitor” (the party who is obligated to indemnify the other party against the loss or damage) becomes effective—it is, in effect, a deductible. One of the purposes of such a threshold deductible is to avoid disputes over insignificant amounts of money. The amount of the basket usually depends on the size of the transaction—the larger the purchase price, the more likely the basket will be greater. Some buyers negotiate for a “threshold” deductible that, once crossed, entitles the indemnifying party to cover all damages rather than just the losses that exceed the amount of the basket.

The parties should keep in mind that an indemnification is worth only as much as the indemnitor. Some companies may not be able to stand behind their indemnification. If the seller plans to dissolve or disband after the closing, special arrangements should be made to specify who will be responsible under the indemnification section of the agreement (e.g., the main stockholders or principals of the seller). Also, some buyers insist on the execution of a post-closing indemnification escrow agreement to secure indemnification rights and also obtain set-off rights with respect to the collection of seller’s accounts receivable and payments under promissory notes. In recent years, some sellers have negotiated for the use of new insurance products to insure representations and warranties to back indemnification, although the premiums for such policies can be quite expensive.

As discussed more extensively in the next section, if the transaction and the parties are of sufficient size, a filing is required under the Hart-Scott-Rodino Antitrust Improvements Act of 1976.¹¹

¹¹ See 15 U.S.C. § 18(a) (2006).

The filing fee is quite significant (currently, \$45,000.00 for transactions under \$126.9 million) and must be paid by the buyer in full to the Federal Trade Commission.¹² The parties usually negotiate whether the fee will be paid by the buyer or split between the seller and the buyer.

III. Giving the Deal its Due (Diligence)

Generally speaking, the due diligence process consists of the investigation and evaluation of the financial condition and operations history of a business enterprise.¹³ The purpose of due diligence is to obtain information about the strengths and weaknesses of the target enterprise, potential legal or other obligations or vulnerabilities, cash flow and future profit potential, competitive position, and other matters that can help the buyer decide whether to go forward with a purchase. If the acquisition is completed, the same information derived from the due diligence process can provide the buyer critical guidance for initial operating decisions. An acquisition is certainly one of the more complex and risky business activities a businessperson can undertake. A thorough due diligence review will help a buyer define acceptable levels of risk.

The due diligence process involved in the acquisition of a radio station should include a review of the general economic and operating conditions as well as such areas as the financial and accounting systems, sales, programming, technical facilities, legal matters, marketing, FCC compliance, employee benefits, taxes, personnel and environmental matters. The objective of the due diligence review is to obtain information that will not only help decide whether or not to proceed with the acquisition, but also assist in determining the amount of the purchase price or projected working capital adjustment. This chapter

¹² *Id.*

¹³ See Erwin G. Krasnow, *Clearing the Air: Deconstructing the Myths and Misconceptions About Buying Broadcast Stations*, 16 Media Law & Policy 25 (2008).

discusses the legal and engineering due diligence process but does not cover the extensive business due diligence that each buyer necessarily must accomplish.

The extent of the due diligence investigation depends on the experience and needs of the buyer, the magnitude of the purchase price, time constraints and various other factors. For example, the financial scope of the effort may range from reviewing the prior year's financial statements and tax returns to a complete audit examination as of a specified date.

A. Due Diligence Legal Review

The legal due diligence process is a team effort, employing primarily the expertise of lawyers and accountants specializing in different areas, such as corporate, tax, labor, employment benefits, FCC, environment, and real property, all working together with the buyer. The legal due diligence process often begins prior to reaching an agreement in principle with the seller, and continues throughout the acquisition process. Indeed, a major objective of the definitive acquisition agreement (particularly the warranties and representations) is to obtain information necessary for, and to verify the results of, a due diligence investigation. It may save time once an agreement in principle is reached to request copies of the documents, which will eventually need to be supplied for the definitive agreement. Most buyers will not sign a definitive agreement until satisfactory due diligence has been conducted, or in the alternative, the agreement allows the buyer to terminate the transaction in the event that the results of due diligence review are not satisfactory.

The acquisition agreement should provide the buyer with the opportunity to undertake business, engineering and legal investigations. The scope of the due diligence investigation prior to closing may depend in part on the nature of the representations and warranties contained in the acquisition agreement, whether the representations and warranties will survive the closing, and the strength of the indemnification provisions. If

the representations will not survive the closing, or if no effective provision for indemnification exists, completing an exhaustive investigation will be more important. While all acquisition agreements contain representations and warranties and usually indemnification provisions, it is far more preferable to unearth all possible liabilities before the buyer executes the agreement, rather than resort to a lawsuit after the sale.

The results of the due diligence investigation will assist the buyer in evaluating the transaction and providing needed protection. Even though the due diligence process is generally the same whether stock or assets are acquired, what is discovered in the process may lead the buyer to decide whether an asset or a stock acquisition is preferable. If a stock purchase agreement is entered into, a prudent buyer will negotiate for stronger representations and warranties to secure protection against hidden liabilities.

It is the responsibility of the lawyer to prepare an acquisition agreement tailored to the facts and circumstances of the particular transaction. For example, if the accountant uncovers past income-tax deficiencies of the seller, the buyer's lawyer should include in the agreement a provision stating that the buyer is not liable for the tax obligations of the seller. Also, the buyer should undertake a comprehensive legal investigation, which should include the seller's litigation history, FCC problems, contractual obligations, liabilities, ownership of realty and personalty, labor relations obligations, copyrights, trademarks and licenses, and obligations to brokers and finders.

B. Business and Financial Review

Any due diligence review of a station must include a careful analysis of the seller's business practices and financial records. At a minimum, that review should include the following:

- The buyer should inspect the station's accounts receivable. Are the accounts bona fide? Have there been extensive pre- payments?

Are there any advertisers that account for a disproportionately large share of the station's business? Are any advertisers being given unusually large discounts and has that practice extended over a protracted period?

- The buyer must also carefully assess the seller's payables. Is the seller current on fees owed under its programming agreements? Is it current on its Arbitron payments?¹⁴ If it is streaming, is the station current on payments to SoundExchange? Are royalty payments current to ASCAP, BMI, and SESAC?¹⁵
- All of the station's financial records must be analyzed to determine the extent to which the records are not being maintained in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles ("GAAP") and to assess the impact of such noncompliance upon the station's financial outlook.
- All programming agreements should be closely reviewed to determine the profitability of the arrangements and the length of the commitments. Is the station saddled with paying fees for programming that it no longer airs? Is the station about to lose the rights to its most profitable program or personality?
- Although more difficult to assess, the seller's standing in the community must be analyzed. A buyer that purchases a station that traditionally has been behind in making payments to vendors or that has a history of heavily relying on trade arrangements may find it necessary to engage in a public relations campaign to alter the community's perception of the station.

¹⁴ Arbitron is a U.S. consumer research company that collects listener data on radio audiences. Arbitron, <http://www.arbitron.com>.

¹⁵ The American Society of Composers ("ASCAP"), Broadcast Music, Inc. ("BMI"), and SESAC are the three U.S. performing rights organizations providing intermediary functions between copyright holders and parties who wish to make public use of copyrighted works. See American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, <http://www.ascap.com>; Broadcast Music, Inc., <http://www.bmi.com>; SESAC, <http://www.sesac.com>.

C. Engineering Review

A due diligence engineering review goes beyond the nuts and bolts of station equipment. While it is important to know the general condition of equipment in order to plan future purchases, other factors can have a far greater impact on station value than the condition of a control board. For example, can the power of the station be increased? Can the tower be moved to a location to serve the market better or to allow the sale of valuable real estate?

Aside from equipment and upgrade concerns, it must be determined whether the station is in compliance with the FCC's rules. There are also environmental issues including the presence of PCBs and radio frequency radiation.

The concerns in the due-diligence engineering review can be broken down into four areas: (1) Analysis of the station's upgrade potential; (2) Assessment of potential competition in the market; (3) Operation in accordance with FCC rules and authorizations; and (4) Inspection of equipment.

IV. Keeping Them Happy at the FCC

The sale of a radio station and the transfer of its license involve legal considerations that are not present in the transfer of most other business enterprises. Unlike unregulated businesses, the closing of a radio station sale cannot take place unless the FCC gives its blessing. Many potential FCC pitfalls may adversely affect both the buyer and the seller. This section presents some practical suggestions for avoiding such pitfalls and making sure that the terms of the purchase agreement satisfy FCC rules and policies.

A. Requirement of Prior FCC Approval

The Communications Act of 1934 provides that a broadcast station construction permit or license may not be assigned nor may control

of an entity holding a license be transferred, except upon application to the FCC and a finding by the Commission that the “public interest, convenience and necessity will be served thereby.”¹⁶ This prohibition applies equally to transfers of *de jure* (legal) and *de facto* (actual) control. “Control” in FCC parlance encompasses any means whereby an individual or entity can “dominate” or “determine” the licensee’s policies and/or corporate affairs, especially those relating to personnel, finances, and programming. Premature transfers of control have resulted in the disapproval of assignment and transfer applications, large fines, and in some cases, the initiation of proceedings to revoke the station’s license.¹⁷ Accordingly, the asset purchase agreement should specifically provide that consummation of the transaction is subject to the prior written approval of the FCC.

For example, one asset purchase agreement included the following provision:

The consummation of this Agreement shall in all respects be subject to the prior consent by the FCC to the terms and conditions of this Agreement, and in particular to the assignment of the Licenses to Purchaser. Purchaser and Seller shall use their best efforts to prepare and file as promptly as practicable, but in no event later than ten (10) business days after the date hereof, with the FCC all applications and other necessary documents to request the FCC Order. After these applications and documents have been filed with the FCC, Purchaser and Seller shall prosecute the applications with all reasonable diligence to promptly obtain an FCC Order.

Some contracts condition the closing on the grant of FCC consent becoming final and no longer subject to review. The following is a definition of a “final order” commonly contained in the acquisition agreement:

¹⁶ 47 U.S.C. § 310(d) (2006).

¹⁷ See *Lorain Journal Co. v. FCC*, 351 F.2d 824 (D.C. Cir. 1965).

“Final Order” means an order or action of the Commission as to which, under FCC Rules, the time for filing a request for administrative or judicial review, or for instituting administrative review *sua sponte*, shall have expired without any such filing having been made or notice of such review having been issued; or, in the event of such filing or review *sua sponte*, as to which such filing or review shall have been disposed of favorably to the grant and the time for seeking further relief with respect thereto under the applicable FCC or court rules shall have expired without any request for such further relief having been filed.

B. Licensee Control

The Communications Act requires that the licensee retain control over the station up to and until the closing and that the buyer assume control immediately upon closing.¹⁸ To meet this requirement, the asset purchase agreement may provide that: “[b]etween the date of this Agreement and the Closing Date, Buyer, its employees or agents, shall not directly or indirectly control, supervise or direct, or attempt to control, supervise or direct, the operation of Stations, and such operation shall be the sole responsibility of and in the complete discretion of Seller, except as may be provided in this Agreement.”

C. Avoiding an Unauthorized Transfer of Control

The FCC requires that station owners exercise sufficient control over major management decisions (finances, personnel, and programming) to ensure that the licensee retains ultimate responsibility for station performance.¹⁹ The Commission regularly has advised prospective buyers to refrain from the premature exercise or assumption of control

¹⁸ See 47 U.S.C. § 310 (2006).

¹⁹ See, e.g., 47 C.F.R. § 73.624(c)(2) (2009); 47 C.F.R. § 73.646(d) (2009); 47 C.F.R. § 73.669(c) (2009). See generally 47 U.S.C. § 310(d) (license ownership restrictions).

of the stations involved.²⁰ Because the presence of the prospective owner's employees at the station on a day-to-day basis lends itself to situations which could easily result in the premature exercise of control, the FCC repeatedly has advised prospective buyers to refrain from the day-to-day participation in the station's affairs while the application awaits Commission approval.

Under such circumstances, how can a buyer ensure that prior to the closing, the target station is being operated to its expectations? Four devices for dealing with this problem are (1) a consulting contract; (2) a services agreement; (3) a joint sales agreement (if the buyer currently has a radio station in the market); and (4) a local marketing agreement. Under the first option, the seller and buyer enter into an agreement pursuant to which the seller retains the buyer as a consultant. Under the auspices of this agreement, the buyer as consultant acts as the licensee/seller's contractor and may provide services touching upon the operation of the station to the extent spelled out in the agreement and always subject to the oversight and control of the licensee. Under the consulting agreement, the seller usually pays the buyer some specified sum in exchange for the consulting services. The expense needs to be considered in setting the purchase price for the station.

Under the local marketing agreement ("LMA"), also known as a Time Brokerage Agreement, the buyer buys the broadcast time of the target station on a wholesale basis pending the closing. Buyer provides the programming for the station and sells advertising. As in the case of the consulting agreement, the LMA must unequivocally reserve to the licensee/seller the unlimited right to suspend, cancel, or reject any programming furnished or recommended by the lessee/buyer. Additionally, the licensee remains responsible for the salaries of certain

²⁰ The Commission has issued monetary forfeitures against licensees found to have prematurely transferred control of a station. *See, e.g.,* Birach Broad. Corp., Notice of Apparent Liability for Forfeiture and Order, 25 FCC Rcd. 2635 (Mar. 17, 2010) (fining the licensee \$15,000 for an unauthorized transfer of control of a radio station and failure to adhere to requirements for maintaining a main studio).

employees and other costs of the station's operations, as well as for compliance with all regulatory requirements such as maintenance of the public inspection file and political file. In contrast to a consulting agreement, under the LMA, the broker/buyer customarily pays the licensee/seller for the lease of the airtime. These payments can also stand on their own or be treated as advances that will reduce the purchase price stated in the purchase agreement. In addition, an LMA between the seller and buyer of a station must be filed with the FCC as part of the FCC application.²¹ Some buyers are reluctant to enter into an LMA because: (a) the Media Bureau usually processes assignment and transfer applications in about 45 days and (b) a competitor of the station might file a petition to deny alleging that an unauthorized transfer of control has occurred.

Whether it is a consulting agreement or an LMA, a carefully drafted document should include a provision that "nothing in this Agreement shall be construed to prevent or hinder the licensee from retaining and exercising full and complete control over the station, including, but not limited to, control of its finances, personnel, and programming." The wording of these agreements is critical in situations where the general manager is buying the station or a "workout team" plans to assume a managerial role. But words alone will not necessarily immunize the station from a determination by the FCC that an unauthorized transfer has occurred. The parties must maintain continuous oversight to ensure that the seller makes all key management decisions, particularly those relating to station financing, programming and employment. A contemporaneous written record of each approval is recommended.

Yet another approach to the problem is to include a provision whereby the seller agrees "to allow Buyer an observer who will have full and free access to the Purchased Assets so that Buyer's organization

²¹ The Federal Trade Commission regards the execution of a LMA as a reportable transaction under the Hart-Scott-Rodino Antitrust Improvements Act if the buying and selling companies meet the statutory tests.

shall have an opportunity to study existing operations and prepare for a smooth transition to ownership.” Such an opportunity should also make clear that “the observer shall have no role in the operation of the Station prior to the Closing.” This provision, however, provides only a minimal amount of protection to the buyer. Where there is concern about the continuing viability of the station, a consulting contract might provide greater protection.

It is also important to guard against violating the FCC’s prohibition on an unauthorized transfer of control before signing bank or other financing agreements.²² Banks use a variety of techniques to place pressure on borrowers who are in default. In some instances, this pressure comes perilously close to violating the Communications Act by unduly restricting the discretion of the licensee of the station.²³ For example, one bank was rumored to have ordered the owner of a group of radio stations to cut costs by firing each of the general managers and by having the sales manager at each station also act as general manager. Some banks also have tried to induce borrowers in default to execute a power of attorney giving the lender the authority to sign an application to assign the license of the station to a new buyer. One bank tried to include the following provision in a forbearance agreement: “Simultaneously upon the execution of this Agreement, the Borrower shall complete (but not date) and execute an FCC Form 314, Assignment of License, in blank and deliver the same to the Bank, such that the Bank shall possess an undated current and effective FCC Form 314 for the transfer of the Station’s FCC licenses at all times.” The FCC staff has taken the position that both a power of attorney of the kind just described and the signing of blank application forms clearly violate FCC policy and constitute an unauthorized transfer of control as of the date of the signing.²⁴

²² See 47 U.S.C. § 310(d) (2006).

²³ See *id.*

²⁴ See Stephen F. Sewell, *Assignments and Transfers of Control of FCC Authorizations Under Section 310(d) of the Communications Act of 1934*, 43 Fed. Comm. L.J. 277, 335 (1991).

Radio broadcasters should not, indeed may not, sign away their rights as licensees. Such action jeopardizes their licenses. Some broadcasters have taken the position that they will sign an assignment application in only two situations: either when an asset purchase agreement with a buyer of their choice has been executed, or if (and when) the bank secures a court order forcing them to sign an assignment application.

If the parties do decide to enter into an LMA, the seller must take particular pains to make sure that the buyer's actions under the LMA do not result in a situation where seller is in technical breach of the purchase agreement because of buyer's actions under the LMA. For example, many purchase agreements include a representation by the seller that the station is being operated in material compliance with the FCC's rules and regulations. If the buyer provides programming under the scope of the LMA that the Commission deems to be indecent, however, the seller's representation concerning the station's compliance with the FCC's rules and regulations will no longer be correct. This could lead to the anomalous situation wherein the buyer could terminate the purchase agreement because of the failure of that representation even though the buyer is the party that caused the representation, to no longer be true. To avoid precisely this kind of situation, the parties to a recent agreement included the following provision in their purchase agreement:

Notwithstanding anything contained herein to the contrary, the Seller shall not be deemed to have breached or otherwise failed to fulfill any of its representations, warranties, covenants or agreements contained herein or to have failed to satisfy any condition precedent to Purchaser's obligation to perform under this Agreement (nor shall the Seller have any liability or responsibility to Purchaser in respect of any such representations, warranties, covenants, agreements or conditions precedent), in each case only to the extent that the breach of or failure to fulfill any such representation, warranty, covenant or agreement or the inability to satisfy any such condition precedent is due, directly or indirectly, to (i) any actions taken by or at the direction of Purchaser

or its Affiliates (or any of their respective officers, directors, employees, agents or representatives) in connection with the Purchaser's performance of its obligations under the [LMA] or (ii) the failure of Purchaser to perform any of its obligations under the [LMA].

Although LMAs have been in use for nearly twenty years, there is always the possibility that the FCC could decide to forbid their use in the future or could rule that certain standard LMA provisions are not in the public interest. As a result, it is incumbent upon the parties to the LMA to make provision for either or both of these possibilities. For example, in one Local Programming and Marketing Agreement, the parties included a provision that stipulated that “[e]ither party to this Agreement may terminate this Agreement if the FCC’s policies or rules change in a manner that would require such termination by providing the other party with ten (10) days advance written notice.” Although this type of provision addresses the question of what is to happen in the event that the FCC forbids LMAs. It does not address the more likely scenario of the FCC adopting regulations that would require the parties to change their operations pursuant to the LMA. The following is a more comprehensive provision addressing this issue:

In the event of any order or decree of an administrative agency or court of competent jurisdiction, including without limitation any material change or clarification in FCC rules, policies, or precedent, that would cause this Agreement to be invalid or violate any applicable law, and such order or decree has become effective and has not been stayed, the parties will use their respective best efforts and negotiate in good faith to modify this Agreement to the minimum extent necessary so as to comply with such order or decree without material economic detriment to either party, and this Agreement, as so modified, shall then continue in full force and effect. In the event that the parties are unable to agree upon a modification of this Agreement so as to cause it to comply with such order or decree without material economic detriment to either party, then this Agreement shall be terminated. . . .

D. The Rule Against Reversion and Reservation of Time

Question 3 of Section II, the assignor's portion of FCC Form 314, asks the seller of a station to certify that the purchase agreement and related agreements submitted to the Commission "embody the complete and final understanding between licensee/permittee and assignee . . . and [that they] comply fully with the Commission's rules and policies." As the instructions to the application observe, an applicant must consider "a broad range of issues" in order to make this certification. To help applicants navigate through these issues, the FCC has added a number of worksheets to Form 314.²⁵

Worksheet #2 of Form 314 aids applicants in determining whether their agreements satisfy Commission requirements. Item 4 on the worksheet inquires whether the agreements provide in any way "for a reversion of the license(s) in the event of default or any right to reassignment of the license in the future[.]" The worksheet specifically notes that "[t]he response to [this question] must be 'No' in order to certify that the contractual documents comply fully with the Commission's rules and policies. If 'Yes,' the applicant may not make the appropriate certification."

Section 73.1150, which is the Commission's "rule against reversion," prohibits clauses in contracts (a) providing for reversion (i.e., reassignment of a license) or "reacquisition" of station control in the event of default by the purchaser and (b) reserving to the seller any rights to use the facilities of the station as a condition of the sale. In interpreting its prohibition against reversions, the Commission has consistently refused to grant transfer and assignment applications where the former owner retained the right to regain the status of licensee through reversion of stock control or reassignment of the license. FCC policy demands that the buyer be free to dispose of the control of the corporation or the station license without the former owner's consent.

²⁵ FCC, Form 314 Instructions for FCC 314 Application for Consent to Assignment of Broadcast Station Construction Permit or License.

Where the deal contemplates a stock transaction, the exchange may involve either positive stock control (that is, a sale of a voting interest in the company exceeding 50 percent) or negative control (that is, a voting interest of exactly 50 percent that can act as a veto on actions by the shareholders holding the remaining 50 percent of the voting shares). Regardless whether the sale involves positive or negative control of a corporate licensee, however, the sale must be absolute, with no reversionary rights in the event of default. The voting rights to the stock must immediately be transferred to and remain with the buyer until other disposition is made of the stock with the prior consent of the Commission. The buyer may pledge the stock with a pledgee, including the seller, but, title to the stock and any related voting rights may not revert to the seller under any circumstances. However, provision may be made for allowing the stock to be sold at a public auction in the event of a default, or in a private sale to a buyer found after the default, at which time the seller could also be a bidder.

The Commission's prohibition against reversionary interests most often comes into play in situations in which seller financing is used. A seller naturally wants to make sure that it will receive full consideration for the station and that it is protected in the event the buyer defaults on the note. The temptation will be to include in the purchase agreement, the security agreement or even in the note itself a provision whereby the seller will get the station back if the buyer were to default. This, however, is a classic example of a prohibited reversionary interest. The temptation to provide the seller with a reversionary interest in the event of a default on a note is so great that the Commission staff frequently will ask the parties to a transaction involving seller paper to confirm that the transaction does not give the seller the right to get the station back in the event that the buyer defaults on the note.

The rule against reversionary interests not only prohibits the blatant form of reversionary interest that would arise if the sales documentation simply stated that the station reverts back to the seller in the event of a

default by the buyer. The rule also prohibits any reservation of rights to “use the facilities of the station for any period whatsoever.” This provision has been interpreted by the Commission staff to mean not just that a seller cannot retain the right to use the physical facilities of the station, but also that the seller may not enter into a local marketing agreement with the buyer that would permit seller to provide programming to the station. Although case precedent addressing the point is sparse, the Commission staff has stated that, in the context of a television LMA, a provision whereby the seller would be able to provide programming over the station after closing “would appear to violate the plain language” of the reversionary rule to the extent that the LMA is “either a condition of, or consideration for, the proposed transaction.”²⁶

E. Hypothecation and Security Provisions

It is important to understand the distinction between the station’s license and the station’s non-licensed assets.

The FCC consistently has held that a broadcast license may not be encumbered by mortgage, lien, pledge, or lease.²⁷ The rationale for this principle is that the license belongs to the government and such an encumbrance endangers the independence of the licensee who must be at all times responsible and accountable to the FCC.²⁸ A licensee should also be free to assign the license of the station or transfer control to anyone of his or her choice without the consent of creditors or others (subject, of course, to the prior consent of the FCC).

Where the agreement specifies that Commission approval must be obtained prior to any assignment of voting control, the FCC has allowed loan agreements to require a pledge of the capital stock of the licensee corporation as security. The FCC also has allowed security provisions

²⁶ Nexstar Broad., Inc., and Mission Broad., Inc., Letter, 23 FCC Rcd. 3528 (Mar. 3, 2008).

²⁷ *Merkley*, 94 F.C.C. 2d at 830 (1983).

²⁸ *Id.* at 830–831.

prohibiting the purchaser from making major expenditures not contemplated in the ordinary course of a broadcast operation without the lender's approval. The FCC permits the loan documents to require the borrower, in the event of a default, to cooperate with the lender in the appointment of a receiver. Although neither a station's license nor control of a licensee corporation may be the subject of a security agreement, a station's physical assets may be foreclosed or sold without the prior consent of the Commission.

F. FCC Processing of Assignment and Transfer Applications

Because the Communications Act requires FCC approval of any change in the control of a licensee, an entity controlling a licensee, a sole proprietorship, or the holder of a majority voting interest,²⁹ assignments of license and transfers of control can take many forms. An assignment or transfer can be voluntary, as in the case of the consensual sale of a station between two parties, or involuntary, as where a corporate licensee becomes bankrupt or a sole proprietor licensee dies. Likewise, an assignment or transfer can involve a change in ultimate control of the licensee, or it can merely be pro forma, such as changing the ownership structure of a licensee without actually changing the party ultimately in control. Applications for FCC consent to involuntary or pro forma assignments or transfers of control follow "short form" procedures. That is, they utilize FCC Form 316 (the "short form"), are subject to less stringent public notice requirements, and are processed more quickly.

For the most part, the discussion in this article relates to voluntary assignments or transfers of control resulting in a de facto and a de jure change in the ownership and control of the license or the licensee. These types of deals are called "long form" transactions. That is, parties to such agreements must file a long form application—FCC Form 314 in the case of assignments, FCC Form 315 in the case of transfers of

²⁹ See 47 U.S.C. § 310(d) (2006).

control—to seek FCC consent to the transaction. If the buyer proposes to employ five or more full-time employees, it must separately file a Model EEO Program Report on FCC Form 396-A. In considering such applications, the Commission does not permit the filing of competing applications for the station's assigned frequency, but instead evaluates only the "basic" qualifications of the parties (especially the transferee or assignee) to dispose of and to acquire the license that is the subject matter of the application.

Although the discussion in this article focuses on voluntary assignments or transfers of control, there is one form of involuntary action about which every prospective seller or buyer needs to be aware. Specifically, the Commission treats any action whereby a federal or state court appoints a trustee, debtor-in-possession or a receiver as an "involuntary" assignment or transfer even if the licensee is a willing participant to the proceeding.³⁰ Because such bankruptcy and receivership actions are treated as being "involuntary," not voluntary, FCC consent can be obtained by filing for such consent on the "short form," FCC Form 316. Short form applications are not subject to the statutory 30-day period for the filing of petitions to deny discussed below and it is not uncommon for the Commission staff to grant short-form applications within days of their being filed. Because the Commission need not observe the 30-day period for the filing of petitions to deny and because such applications are frequently acted on within days of filing, it is unusual for objections to be filed with respect to short-form applications. Simply put, the logistics are such that interested parties may be unable to get an objection on file before the FCC staff acts on the application.

In addition, it is customary for the short form application that is submitted in response to a bankruptcy or receivership proceeding to

³⁰ See FCC, Form 316 Instructions for Consent to Assign Broadcast Station Construction Permit or License or Transfer of Control of Entity Holding Broadcast Station Construction Permit or License. <http://www.fcc.gov/Forms/Form316/316.pdf>.

be filed after the court has appointed the debtor-in-possession, trustee or receiver. In fact, the normal procedure is to include a copy of the court order appointing the debtor-in-possession, trustee or receiver as part of the short form application. The court order can also serve as the signature of a recalcitrant licensee/assignor. In most cases, the FCC staff will defer to the decision of the court—unless that decision is at odds with the Communications Act or the Commission’s rules or policies.

Once a new buyer is found for the station through the bankruptcy or receivership process, another application seeking FCC consent must be filed. In this case, however, the Commission requires that a “long-form” application, namely an FCC Form 314 or an FCC Form 315, must be used. The long-form application is required in order to permit the Commission staff to examine the proposed licensee and its principals to ensure that their ownership of the station would be consistent with the Communications Act and the Commission’s rules and policies.

The Commission formerly required applications for consent to assignment of license or for transfer of control to be filed in hard copy and in triplicate. However, the Commission no longer accepts paper versions of FCC Forms 314, 315 and 316. Instead, these forms must be filed electronically.³¹ The application is subject to a filing fee.³²

³¹ *Media Bureau Electronic Filing and Public Access*, FCC, <http://www.fcc.gov/mb> (*Media Bureau Consolidated Database System Electronic Filing System*, FCC)

³² The amount of the fee assessed for the application may be found in either the FCC Fee Filing Guide, or as specified in special electronic filing Public Notices. Applicants must pay the FCC filing fee at the time their application is electronically filed or shortly thereafter. The Commission offers an electronic fee payment system, which allows immediate payment by credit card and facilitates faster processing of the application. Payment also may be made by check or money order sent to the FCC’s lockbox bank. This will delay application processing by several days, however, and if there is an error in processing the check, the application may risk being dismissed for failure to pay the filing fee on time.

An FCC Registration Number (“FRN”) is required for the filing of all FCC forms. Pursuant to the Debt Collection Improvement Act of 1995, the FCC is required to request this ten digit entity identifier from anyone doing business with the Commission. An FRN can be applied for and obtained from the FCC Commission Registration System (“CORES”), which is linked on the FCC’s homepage, <http://fcc.gov>.

After the seller and buyer file the application, and the filing fee is recorded, the Commission staff begins processing it. If the staff determines upon this initial review that the application is complete, within five to ten days after the filing, the FCC will issue a public notice announcing that the application has been accepted for filing.

Following the release of this initial public notice, a statutory 30-day period must elapse during which interested parties may file “petitions to deny” against the application. Challenges to the application may also be submitted at any time in the form of “informal objections.” Such objections do not carry the same procedural protections as formal petitions; however, objections that raise material concerns will often receive the careful attention of the Commission staff. If, at the end of the 30-day period, a petition to deny or other objection has been filed, the timing of final Commission action on the application becomes quite uncertain. Such filings can add several months, and in some cases even years, to the processing time for an application.

In the absence of any objection, an application becomes ripe for Commission action at the close of the 30-day period, and the parties can typically expect to receive a grant between five days and one month after the comment period. Customarily, the staff will make an action granting an application immediately effective although the public notice

An applicant submits its application via the on-line Consolidated Database System maintained by the FCC Media Bureau (“CDBS”). It provides a link to initiate the FCC Electronic Form 159 (“Remittance Advice”) system. The system will calculate the appropriate fee and provide for launching a browser for completion of the Electronic Form 159.

The applicant may print the completed Form 159 and send it to FCC bank lockbox by mail or courier, or may pay electronically. The Commission cautions that payment of the fee must be received by the bank within 14 calendar days of the date that the application is submitted. This deadline applies whether payment is submitted electronically or by a paper check. If payment is not received in time, the filed application will be considered to be not paid and the Media Bureau will not process it.

An applicant may elect to submit an application without immediately initiating the fee filing process. Applicants can submit their applications and then defer the submission of the fee. This arrangement can be useful if the applicant paying the filing does not have readily at hand all the information required to be included on the Form 159. The downside to this arrangement is that it increases the risk that the applicant will fail to timely submit the filing fee and risks dismissal of its application.

announcing the action will be issued about three business days after the grant.

Upon release of the public notice announcing the staff's action on the application, another statutory 30-day period opens within which aggrieved parties (unsuccessful petitioners to deny or new third parties in the case of a granted application and the applicants themselves in the event of a denial) may petition the Commission staff to reconsider the decision if the grant is made pursuant to delegated authority. The Commission, for its part, has an additional 10 days (for a total of 40 days) within which it may review the staff's action on its own motion. As with a petition to deny, the filing of a petition for reconsideration can make it very difficult to forecast accurately the timing of final action on the application. This is particularly true because the staff's decision on reconsideration itself then becomes subject, potentially, to further review by the Commission or by the U.S. Court of Appeals. If no petitions for reconsideration are filed, and the Commission takes no action, a grant of the application is deemed to be "final" by operation of law and is no longer subject to legal challenge, on the 41st day after public notice of the grant.

G. Closing Before a Final Order

The grant of an assignment or transfer of control application is not "final" until after the disposition of all applications for review, petitions for reconsideration and judicial review and the passage of the 40-day period during which the Commission can revisit a staff grant of an application. Most contracts provide that the closing shall not take place until the FCC's grant of the transfer or assignment application has become a "final order." However, there is no legal barrier to closing before finality. The FCC's grant is effective immediately. The Commission has stated that parties that elect to close a transaction exercise their own business judgment and proceed at their own risk

with the full understanding that they may ultimately be required to undo the transaction.³³

Many parties accept the risk and close before a grant becomes final. How can the seller and the buyer protect themselves if they close before a final order and the FCC subsequently rescinds the grant? One way of handling this rare occurrence is for the parties to include an “unwind” or rescission provision in the asset purchase agreement. The following is an example of such a provision:

If the Closing occurs prior to a Final FCC Consent, and prior to becoming Final, the FCC Consent is reversed or otherwise set aside, and there is a Final order of the FCC (or court of competent jurisdiction) requiring the re-assignment of the FCC Authorizations to Seller, then Seller and Buyer agree that the purchase and sale of the Station Assets shall be rescinded. In such event, Buyer shall re-convey to Seller the Station Assets, and Seller shall repay to Buyer the Purchase Price and reassume the Seller Contracts assigned and assumed by Buyer at Closing. Any such rescission shall be consummated on a mutually agreeable date within thirty (30) calendar days of such Final order (or, if earlier, within the time required by such order). In connection therewith, Buyer and Seller shall each execute such documents (including execution by Buyer of instruments of assumption of the Seller Contracts assigned and assumed at Closing) and make such payments (including repayment by Seller to Buyer of the Purchase Price) as are necessary to give effect to such rescission. Seller's and Buyer's obligations under this section shall survive the Closing.

In some transactions where the parties dispense with the requirement for a final order as a condition to closing, they enter into a rescission agreement (also called an “unwind” agreement) at the closing which sets forth the procedures and ramifications in the event that the FCC were

³³ *Washington Ass'n for Television and Children v. FCC*, 665 F.2d 1264 (D.C. Cir. 1981) (holding that parties who consummate a sale transaction before its approval becomes final assume the risk that the sale may later be set aside by the Commission or the courts).

to rescind the grant. Such agreements normally provide for the return to the status quo ante in the event of a later FCC or court order vacating the FCC consent.

V. How to Avoid Seller's Remorse: Selling Without Selling Out

To use Charles Dickens' often quoted phrase, selling a radio station can be "the best of times" if the seller finds the right buyer who is willing to pay the best price at optimal and secure terms in a transaction structured to maximize the after-tax benefits to the seller. But it can be "the worst of times" if there are strategic mistakes in the pricing or presentation of the station, if administrative snafus prevent the transaction from moving forward in a timely manner, or if important details are left undone. This section discusses some of the business considerations that a seller should address before placing a station on the market and suggests some contractual provisions to protect the seller's interests. Although this section is written from a seller's perspective, prospective buyers who would like insights on how to deal with the party on the other side of the bargaining table will also find it valuable.

A. Overall Business Strategy

Time spent planning and preparing for the sale of a radio station is time well spent for the seller. The first important decision any seller has to make concerns timing. If you can avoid it, don't attempt to sell in the midst of an economic downturn. Make sure that prospective buyers understand your station's current economic value as well as its future growth potential. Another important threshold step is determining the method you will use to find the right buyer. Do you want to use confidential bids? An open auction? Selecting an aggressive and creative media broker and/or investment banker is another key preliminary task.

B. Contract Provisions Protecting the Seller's Interest

Typically the buyer's counsel prepares the initial draft of the definitive acquisition agreement. The following is a listing of the negotiating approaches often taken by counsel for the seller in responding to the buyer's initial draft:

- diluting the strength of the seller's representations and warranties by adding phrases such as "to seller's knowledge" or "to the best of seller's knowledge" and including materiality exceptions (e.g., phrases such as "in all material respects"); the addition of "knowledge" qualifications to the representations and warranties can significantly limit the buyer's post-closing indemnification rights by shifting to the buyer the economic risks of unknown facts;
- placing a "basket" (the dollar losses that must be suffered by the buyer before the buyer's claims for indemnification are asserted and then whether all damages may be recovered or just those in excess of the agreed amount), a "ceiling" or "cap" on the seller's liability for indemnification (the total amount of damages for which the seller may be liable) and the type of damages to which the buyer is entitled (whether consequential or punitive damages are excluded or modified in some ways);
- avoiding the inclusion of overly broad provisions which enable the buyer to terminate the agreement or its obligations to close in the event of a minor breach by the seller or its failure to fulfill a minor condition;
- limiting the period of time for the survival of the seller's representations and warranties;
- negotiating against the inclusion of a "material adverse change" clause;

- limiting the type of conditions to the buyer's obligations to close beyond those that are "normal and customary;"
- not allowing the buyer to terminate the acquisition agreement without a penalty (e.g., loss of earnest money deposit) as a result of its failure to obtain financing or approval of its governing board or shareholders; and
- insisting on the assumption of all contracts by the buyer so that the seller is not burdened with paying off any agreements.

The remainder of this section provides specific examples of provisions in the acquisition agreement that are designed to protect the seller's interests.

1. Assuring that the Buyer Is Financially Qualified

The seller's primary concern is whether the proposed buyer will have the funds available at the closing to purchase the station. Thus, sales contracts typically contain a provision such as "Buyer represents that it is, and at the closing shall be, legally and financially qualified under rules, regulations and policies established by the Commission to be the licensee of Radio Station."

The seller should not allow the buyer to include a provision in the acquisition agreement that permits it to "walk away" from the purchase if it is unable to obtain financing. In some transactions, the seller negotiates for a provision that renders the buyer's failure to close because of the lack of funds a breach of contract. For instance, one asset purchase agreement stated that "Buyer intends to finance a portion of the purchase price through borrowing of funds from one or more third parties, [and] Buyer knows of no reason why such third parties should not fund the loan to Buyer." The agreement also provided that:

Any failure of the Buyer's lenders to fund the loan to acquire the assets to be conveyed hereunder shall be treated as a breach

by Buyer of its obligations hereunder, regardless of what cause may in such event be stated by Buyer's lenders or Buyer, including the quality of the Personal Tangible Assets or Seller's corporation.

2. Making Sure of the Buyer's Legal Qualifications

FCC approval of a transaction might be delayed or even denied if the buyer does not possess the requisite legal qualifications to be a licensee of a radio station or is deemed to have excessive concentration of media interests in the market. A broadly worded provision such as the following covers the various legal qualifications required by the FCC:

The Purchaser is legally and financially qualified under the Communications Act to enter into this Agreement and the Purchaser Documents, and to consummate the transactions contemplated hereby and thereby. It is not necessary for the Purchaser or any Affiliate of the Purchaser (or any person in which the Purchaser or any Affiliate of the Purchaser has an attributable interest under the Communications Act) to seek or obtain any waiver from the FCC, dispose of any interest in any media or communications property or interest, terminate any venture or arrangement, or effectuate any changes or restructuring of its ownership, including, without limitation, the withdrawal or removal of officers or directors or the conversion or repurchase of equity securities of the Purchaser or any Affiliate of the Purchaser or owned by the Purchaser or any Affiliate of the Purchaser (or any person in which Purchaser or any Affiliate of the Purchaser has any attributable interest under the Communications Act). The Purchaser is able to certify on an FCC Form 314 that it is financially qualified.

In a similar vein, a sales agreement provided as follows:

Buyer is legally, financially and otherwise qualified to acquire and own the Station and operate the Station's Business under all applicable federal, state and local laws, rules and regulations, including the Communications Act. The filing of the Assignment Application will not require any waiver

of the FCC's rules, regulations and policies, with respect to Buyer or any Person having an attributable interest in Buyer pursuant to the Communications Act or the rules, regulations and policies of the FCC. To Buyer's Knowledge, no fact or circumstance exists relating to the FCC qualifications of Buyer that (a) could reasonably be expected to prevent or delay the FCC from granting the Assignment Application or (b) would otherwise disqualify Buyer as the licensee, owner, operator or assignee of the Station.

3. Selling Assets But Obtaining the Benefits of a Stock Sale

In some situations and especially for tax reasons, the seller of a radio station might insist on a sale of stock (rather than assets). Buyers generally prefer to purchase assets rather than to risk assuming hidden liabilities by acquiring stock and in order to get the tax benefits of a stepped-up-basis of the assets. One seller devised an unusual and creative solution by persuading the buyer to agree to the following provision:

The Purchase Price will be increased by an amount equal to the amount by which, all else being equal, the income taxes of the Stockholders resulting from this sale of assets exceeds the income taxes of the Stockholders which would have been payable upon a sale of stock of the Seller, as reasonably determined by Seller's accountants, plus \$10,000.00 to compensate Seller for additional attorney's and accounting fees, provided that Seller, Seller's accountants and the Stockholders will make available to Buyer such information as Buyer shall reasonably request for purposes of verifying the determination of Seller's accounts, including income tax returns if needed.

4. Limiting Personnel and Promotional Obligations

Most asset purchase agreements require the seller to use its best efforts to retain existing employees and to maintain the same levels of expenditure for advertising and promotion. However, one seller negotiated the inclusion of the following provision:

Except for the level of Sales Department employees (which Seller intends to reduce shortly after execution of this Agreement), Seller will use its best efforts to maintain its staff levels; however, Seller shall be under no obligation to hire employees to replace any employees who may voluntarily resign between the period from execution of the Final Sale Agreement and the Closing.

The Agreement also provided that “Seller shall be under no obligation to maintain the same levels of expenditures for advertising and promotional efforts as expended prior to execution of this Agreement.”

In another asset purchase agreement the seller obtained the following provision: “It is understood and agreed that the defection of any of the Stations’ present employees following the execution of this Agreement and prior to the Closing Date shall not constitute a material adverse change in the business of Seller.”

5. Easing the Pain of the Buyer’s Default

How can the seller be protected if the buyer “walks” from the deal? Most agreements provide for the collection of liquidated damages by the seller (usually, the total amount of the escrow deposit) in the event of a breach of any material representation, warranty, covenant, or condition. Typically, the liquidated damages provision makes clear that the seller has no other remedies in the event of a breach. For example, one asset purchase agreement stated that “[r]ecovery of liquidated damages from the Escrow Account shall be the sole and exclusive remedy of Seller against Buyer for failing to consummate this Agreement on the Closing Date and shall be applicable regardless of the actual amount of damages sustained.”

In some situations, sellers have been able to negotiate a provision which gives them the option of collecting the escrow deposit as liquidated damages or going to court to collect compensatory damages. For example, an asset purchase agreement provided that in the event

of a material breach by the buyer of any of its representations and warranties, the seller had the option of treating the escrow deposit as liquidated damages or, at seller's option, waiving the right to liquidated damages and bringing "an action at law or in equity to cover its actual compensatory damages, if any, sustained as a result of such default."

6. Selling the Equipment "As Is"

Sometimes the seller of a station tries to obtain a provision that, in effect, states that the buyer is acquiring the equipment and the buildings on an "as is" basis. One asset purchase agreement provided that "Buyer and Seller agree that Seller expressly disclaims any warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose, and that Buyer has obtained the advice of independent engineers employed by Buyer as to the usefulness or fitness of the personal tangible assets for Buyer's purposes."

7. Turning Adversity into a Tax Deduction: A Charitable Donation

Are there any alternatives to bankruptcy for a deficit ridden radio station that cannot attract buyers? One alternative carrying potential tax benefits for the owner is for the licensee to donate the assets of the station to a qualified Section 501(c)(3) charitable corporation. For example, a licensee donated the assets of the station to a local college. One agreement provided that the donor intended that "the transfer of STATION to COLLEGE shall be a contribution to enhance COLLEGE's public educational services" and stated that the "Donor values the equipment, facilities and other elements of this donation of STATION to COLLEGE at [specified sum]." One cautionary note: the Internal Revenue Service requires an appraisal that documents the value attributed to the assets of the station.

8. Profiting From a Material Positive Change: The Flip Side of Material Adverse Change

A “material adverse change” provision is included in some contracts to protect the buyer in the event that the station performs poorly between the date of the execution of the acquisition agreement and the closing. Generally, sellers take the position that a “material adverse change” provision is not appropriate if a LMA is entered into on the ground that the LMA shifts the operating risk to the buyer.

By contrast, some agreements provide for an upward adjustment of the purchase price for the seller in the event the station performs significantly better than anticipated. For example in one asset purchase agreement the parties agreed that the cash payment to be paid by the buyer to the seller at the closing would be increased on a dollar for dollar basis, by the increase in working capital during the term of the time brokerage agreement into which the parties were entering contemporaneously with the execution and delivery of the purchase agreement. Conversely, the parties also agreed that the cash payment to be paid by the buyer would be decreased, on a dollar for dollar basis, in an amount equal to any decrease in working capital that occurred during the term of the time brokerage agreement.

A “material positive change” clause can be very useful for a seller when there is clear reason to expect that the station will increase in value following the closing. For example, say you’re the licensee of a small market radio station and you have a construction permit application on file with the FCC to relocate the station closer to a major metropolitan center. You’ve decided to sell the facility before completing the upgrade, but you would still like to realize an upside from the increased value the upgrade is likely to deliver. How do you achieve that objective?

One approach to this problem can be found in an asset purchase agreement in which the parties established a base purchase price for the station of \$7 million, which was subject to upward adjustment if the

buyer, within three years of acquiring the station, successfully completed the upgrade and sold the station to a third party for a net profit in excess of \$10 million. The specific amount of the adjustment depended on the amount of the net profits from the resale. Specifically, in the event that the net profits on the resale of the station were between \$10 million and \$30 million, the seller, was to receive a 10% share of the net profits in addition to the base price. If the net profits exceeded \$30 million, the seller, would be entitled to 25% of the net profits over that figure.

To effectuate these provisions, the agreement required the buyer to notify the seller in writing within five days of entering an agreement for the sale of the upgraded station to a third party. The notice was required to include the amount of the purchase price adjustment to which the seller was entitled. Moreover, because the agreement provided that the net profits were to consist of the buyer's net proceeds for the resale minus all of its direct costs related thereto (including, e.g., legal and engineering fees, filing fees, build out costs, and any costs associated with the third party purchase agreement or any channel change agreements), the buyer was also required to furnish an itemized breakdown of the costs used to calculate net profits, which breakdown was subject to audit by the seller. Finally, the agreement directed the buyer to instruct the third party purchaser to distribute the purchase price adjustment directly to the seller at the time of the closing of the resale of the station. The caveat to the seller in this kind of arrangement is that the buyer may either wait to sell the station until after the negotiated period of time or may never sell the station.

9. Using Warrants

The use of warrants also enables the seller of a station to reap some benefit from an increase in the value of the property after the station is sold. For example, in one transaction, the purchase price for the stations was one million dollars. The letter-agreement for the purchase of the

stations provided that the buyer would deliver to seller “a warrant for five percent (5%) of the accretion in the stations above the \$1,000,000 price.” The warrant was made exercisable when the stations were sold to an independent third party or at the maturity of the bank loan taken out by buyer (namely, five years from the closing). In the event that the stations were not sold prior to the maturity of the loan, the parties agreed to engage an appraiser to determine the stations’ value. The letter agreement provided that in the event of a disagreement between the appraisers, they would choose a mutually acceptable third appraiser whose opinion would be binding.

10. Obtaining Added Value for Seller Paper

“Seller paper” (a purchase money mortgage) can be used as a means of financing the purchase if mezzanine financing or subordinated debt is difficult to obtain. Seller paper is usually subordinated to senior bank debt and often takes the form of a loan at two to three times cash flow for a five-year period at a fixed interest rate at or below prime. Some agreements give warrants to the seller to provide the seller with the benefit of the possible upside of a transaction. In other transactions, all or some seller paper takes the form of a covenant not to compete. In some deals, the seller is given stock in the acquiring company as well as a promissory note.

In one transaction, the seller agreed to take a promissory note in the amount of \$400,000 with the following terms: (a) the entire principal balance (including any deferred interest accrued during the first year), but would not be due until five years after the closing, and (b) the note would be deemed paid in full if on or before a fixed date, the buyer paid the seller \$250,000 plus all accrued interest. This promissory note reflects a negotiated discount for early payment, which provides a significant benefit for both the buyer and the seller.

In addition, the buyer agreed to deliver another promissory note

with a principal balance equal to the lesser of the face amount of all of the accounts receivable or \$150,000. The asset purchase agreement provided that prior to full payment, the seller could put the note to the buyer in exchange for a 5% stock interest in another broadcast station owned by the buyer “plus the payment of all accrued interest, including any deferred interests accrued during the first year.”

To protect the seller, payment of both promissory notes was secured by a security interest in the tangible and intangible personal property used in the operation of the station. To benefit the buyer, the agreement provided that the buyer’s obligations were subordinate and junior with regard to its obligations (including any refinancing) to one or more institutional lenders up to a maximum principal balance of \$2,500,000. Also, to make sure that the seller helped the buyer obtain financing, the asset purchase agreement provided that:

Seller agrees to cooperate with Buyer, Buyer’s underwriters, lenders, and their respective agents and representatives in connection with Buyer’s financing arrangements, including without limitation providing such information and documents as Buyer may reasonably request for the purpose of obtaining the funds required to consummate the transaction.

This transaction illustrates how the seller can accommodate the buyer by, in effect, providing working capital, by creating an incentive for early payment of a note, and by making it easier for the buyer to obtain financing. In turn, the buyer provides the seller with a subordinated secured interest in the physical assets of the station and an option to purchase stock in another broadcast licensee.

11. Securing Protection for Seller Paper

If the seller provides the buyer with seller paper, what protection can the seller obtain to make sure that the station will be operated properly and that financial and other information will be provided on a timely basis after the closing? One seller sold the station assets for \$4,000,000 and

received the buyer's promissory note in the amount of \$3,200,000. Since the seller paper accounted for the lion's share of the sales price, the seller wanted protection in addition to a security agreement (accompanied by a UCC-1 filing), a trust deed on the real estate, and a pledge agreement from the three individuals who provided personal guarantees.

The asset purchase agreement provided for a series of "post closing covenants" by the buyer concerning the operation of the station in accordance with all laws and regulations, payment of all taxes, maintenance of the assets in good condition and repair, and keeping the assets free of liens and encumbrances. These covenants echo those that the seller provided for the period between execution of the contract and the closing. Also, the buyer was required to keep the assets fully insured against fire, theft or vandalism and to name the seller as an additional insured under the policy and to "insure the life of one of the principals of the buyer" in an amount equal to the unpaid balance of the Note with the Seller named as beneficiary." The buyer was also obligated to provide the seller with quarterly financial statements. The seller or an agent of the seller was given "the right at reasonable times during Buyer's normal business hours to inspect the assets and to inspect, audit and copy any books and records of Buyer relating to the Assets."

Although it would seem logical that the seller should be able to protect itself by providing that the station will revert to the seller in the event that the buyer defaults on the seller paper, this type of reversionary interest is prohibited by the FCC's rules. Section 73.1150 of the Commission's rules is broadly worded. It provides that, in assigning a broadcast license, the licensee "may retain no right of reversion of the license, no right to reassignment of the license in the future, and may not reserve the right to use the facilities of the station for any period whatsoever."³⁴ Moreover, the Commission staff takes the position that such a reversionary interest

³⁴ 47 C.F.R. § 73.1150 (2010).

cannot be salvaged by including a requirement that FCC approval be obtained before the station is reassigned to the seller.

Section 73.1150 can also be read to prevent a seller from holding rights to provide programming over the station once the closing occurs. In an agreement for the sale of a noncommercial educational radio station, the parties included a provision whereby the seller would hold a right of first refusal to “prepare, produce, present on-air, and sell course materials for” college level courses to be aired on the station if the buyer ever proposed to offer such college-level courses as programming on the station. The FCC staff objected to this provision and the parties found it necessary to file an amendment to the purchase agreement that struck this provision. According to the amendment, the parties agreed to strike the provision because the FCC staff had advised counsel for the parties that the provision “must be deleted to bring the Agreement into compliance with FCC rules and policy.”

12. Building a Margin of Error in Financial Statements

One of the most important provisions of a contract is the representation and warranty concerning the accuracy of the financial statements furnished by the seller. The seller should review its financials with its accountant(s) and other experts to identify problems. The wording is often the subject of intense negotiations. In some exceptional situations, the seller is able to negotiate a contract that contains no representations or warranties concerning financials, but the seller should beware. In a stock transaction, SEC Rule 10b-5 prohibits “. . . mak[ing] any untrue statement of a material fact or . . . omit[ting] to state a material fact necessary in order to make the statements made, in the light of the circumstances under which they were made, not misleading.”

While most contracts provide that financial statements are prepared in accordance with “generally accepted accounting principles,” sellers try to include a provision, which allows for a margin of error. For example,

in one asset purchase agreement, the sellers negotiated the following provision:

The financial statements are not audited but are prepared substantially in accordance with accepted accounting principles consistently applied, are correct in all substantial and material respects and present fairly, the operating income and financial condition of the stations as of their respective dates and results of operations for the period then ended.

13. Providing Incentives for the Seller and the Seller's Key Executive

How do you provide an incentive to the hands-on executive of the seller who will be responsible for making or breaking the success of the acquired station? In one asset purchase agreement, an executive of the seller was given a lucrative compensation arrangement whereby he would have a substantial personal stake in the operation. First, he was given an opportunity to purchase stock in the corporation at a sweetheart rate and on sweetheart terms—while the price for the stock was specified as \$100,000, the buyer agreed to loan the executive \$66,667 of the \$100,000, payable over a three-year period. Second, the executive was given options to purchase an additional 15% of the stock: 5% at closing, 5% one year later and 5% in two years for one dollar each purchase. Third, if the stations were to be sold for more than \$50 million, the executive would receive, as a bonus, 20% of the net proceeds; if sold between \$47.5 million and \$50 million, a proportionate percentage.³⁵

The asset purchase agreement also contained a creative way of assuring that the station would have sufficient funds to operate prior to the closing and giving the seller a piece of the action if the station was very profitable the first year after it was sold. The buyer agreed to loan the seller \$200,000 which would be credited against the sale price at closing. If the deal were to fall through, the buyer would take back

³⁵ A cautionary note: any executive compensation plan must comply with the strict requirements contained in Section 409A of the Internal Revenue Code.

\$200,000 with interest plus \$10,000 “to compensate Purchaser for its costs and expenses in making the loan.” The contract provided for “an incentive profit payment” of \$500,000 to the seller if the gross revenues during the first year after closing were greater than or equal to \$4 million. The payment is a creative way of giving the seller a share of the profits without having to give away a stock interest.

14. Obtaining Benefits Through FCC Rulemaking

Diligent broadcasters remain perpetually attuned to application and rulemaking activity at the FCC that could potentially affect their ability to seek an improvement in station facilities such as: increasing the station’s power or moving the antenna closer to a larger market. A rulemaking might lead to a significant improvement in coverage. Generally, these types of facilities improvements take a lot of time. Months and, frequently, years may be devoted to the upgrade project. Having invested substantial time, effort and money in the upgrade project, the seller does not want the buyer to reap the benefits of the project without rewarding the seller for its efforts. The buyer does not want to pay the seller for those efforts unless they produce results. Of course, at the time that the application is filed, the parties cannot be sure that the FCC will grant the application or the rulemaking that will lead to the improvement of the station’s coverage or even that the improved facilities authorized by the FCC will receive local zoning approvals.

The compromise usually achieved in such cases is to include a provision whereby the buyer will make a payment to the seller above and beyond the purchase price if the upgrade project is successful. The difficulty in such cases is in reaching agreement as to what constitutes successful completion of the project. An initial grant by the FCC staff is subject to further review and consideration, so the issuance of a favorable staff decision is usually not a satisfactory point at which to consider the project complete. Even when the staff decision is final, other obstacles

may arise that would prevent the station from ever achieving the facilities upgrade that had been contemplated by the parties. Zoning authorities may deny permission to build the new facility. The tower site may prove to be unsuitable for construction. The construction permit application filed in response to the successful rulemaking may not be granted.

As each milestone in the process of upgrading the facility is reached, the risk that the project may fail decreases, but the length of time that the impatient seller must wait before it receives its payment increases. The seller may be forced to trade dollars for a more immediate payment. Whatever compromise ultimately is reached by the parties, it is vitally important that the payment be tied to a clear, demonstrable event, such as a final FCC decision, a final zoning board decision or the FCC's final grant of a covering license application for the facilities. The use of a well-defined triggering event helps to avoid disputes as to the timetable for payment.

In deciding which event will trigger the payment obligation, the parties may be tempted to use the final grant of the covering license application inasmuch as the issuance of that grant removes virtually all uncertainty as to whether the upgrade will become a reality. Sellers, nevertheless, would be well advised to take care in doing so. Processing of covering license applications has a very low priority at the FCC and as a result, it is not uncommon for many months to elapse before the covering license is granted. In the meantime, buyer is able to make use of the upgraded facilities while seller continues to wait for its payment. From a seller's perspective, that is an unhappy situation. One alternative triggering event that could be used is the FCC's grant of Program Test Authority ("PTA"). Stations routinely operate under the terms of PTA during the time the covering license application is pending. Although grant of PTA does not signal an absolute certainty that the license will be granted, it reduces the risk of non-grant to nearly zero.

VI. How to Make the Closing Look Easy

The closing brings to a successful conclusion the long and sometimes ulcerous process of deciding to sell or purchase a radio station, finding a buyer (or seller), valuing the business, conducting due diligence and negotiating agreements reflecting the interests and intent of the parties. At the closing, the consideration (cash, notes or stock) is exchanged for the property. And if all has gone well, the buyer and seller walk away convinced that each got a good deal, and the lawyers finally smile with a sense of accomplishment, collect the papers and quietly leave the scene to the sweepers and shredders.

We can offer some general guidance to those contemplating a closing. Do not lose sight of the fact that, for the most part, once the deal has been struck, the buyer and seller share the same general objective: to close the deal. No one—not the buyer, the seller, nor their lawyers—relishes surprises at the closing. Taking into account the differing interests of the buyer and seller, try to keep all parties informed as your preparations progress and be ready to solve problems, not just identify them.

On that note, a comprehensive document checklist can give you the memory of an elephant. First, analyze the requirements for the closing and then develop checklists describing the tasks to be accomplished, the documents to be prepared and signed, the persons responsible for each task or document, and the status of preparations and delivery. Second, circulate checklists to all parties early in the preparation period so that they may use them as the vehicle for coordinating the actions and preparations of the buyer, seller, their counsel and their other representatives.

The devil is in the details. The details for the closing are set forth in the acquisition agreement, and a typical agreement will contain sections that usually are titled “Conditions to Closing” or “Deliveries at Closing.” One of the key conditions to closing the purchase and sale of a radio

station in most agreements is the issuance of a final, non-appealable order by the FCC consenting to the transaction (the Final Order). This might be an assignment of the seller's license to the buyer in an asset transaction or a transfer of control stemming from the buyer's purchase of a controlling interest in the company which is the licensee of the station. The grant of an assignment or transfer application by the Media Bureau will become a final order by operation of law 40 days after the issuance of a public notice by the FCC announcing the grant, provided that no petitions for reconsideration or applications for review are filed and that the Commission does not rescind the Bureau's action on its own motion.

In addition, under certain conditions the buyer and seller must make certain notice filings with the Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission pursuant to the Hart-Scott-Rodino Antitrust Improvements Act of 1976, as amended (e.g., the purchase price is more than \$63.4 million and certain other thresholds concerning the size of the buyer and seller are met.) Once the buyer and seller have received notification that the prescribed 30-day waiting period following the filing has been terminated or expired, the parties may proceed to closing.

It is now common practice for the buyer and seller to close without waiting for finality of the FCC grant. Where a lender is involved, the parties sometimes close prior to finality by placing into escrow the funds furnished by the lender and providing for the release of such funds to the seller (with any interest earned thereon) when the FCC grant of the assignment or transfer application becomes a Final Order.

Checklists will help but the heavy lifting usually takes the form of coordinating your actions and documents among all parties, spotting problems in advance, and developing, coordinating and implementing solutions to those problems. Also, consider holding a "pre-closing" at least one day prior to the closing, so that documents may be revised prior to the scheduled date of the closing and the closing can consist only of wiring the money at the opening of business on the closing day.

Since wiring sometimes takes longer than expected, the earlier the funds are wired, the better.

But the preparation and effort are worth it. When the work is complete, the buyer, the seller and their counsel will have shepherded the transaction to its intended conclusion.

VII. A Closing Word

The path of a broadcast station acquisition and sale is a long and sometimes rocky road, from the initial letter of intent to the closing (and through the relevant post-closing period). This article attempted to assist both seller and buyer in identifying and avoiding the potholes and pitfalls in between. Today's broadcast marketplace presents special challenges to buyers and sellers, as to economic outlook and the rise of competing media outlets. These challenges compel the parties in a station transaction to be well briefed and adequately prepared to accomplish their mutual objectives without risking delay, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment in the acquisition process. It has been our goal in this article to assist the reader in minimizing the inevitability of mistakes in the radio station acquisition process, so that seller and buyer make a mutual success of their joint endeavor.

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