

# MONTILLY

R U S S I A N R I V E R

VOL. 10 NO. 2

THE COMMUNITY NEWS AND MORE FOR RURAL WEST SONOMA COUNTY

FEBRUARY 1, 2006



LOIS PEARLMAN

All ears: (L-R) Randy Wells talks about the radio station's future studio — just inside the store-room door — with Beth Hearn, Kit Mariah, and Megan Hope.

## Public radio comes to the River

By Sheila Koren

**T**HE RIVER AREA WAS SWARMING with network broadcasters during the recent flood, but the only way residents were able to get minute-by-minute information about flood levels and evacuation plans was through their new local radio station, KGGV-LPFM The Bridge of Guerneville.

LP stands for low powered. Such stations have a small radius of transmission and fit in between the big stations on the FM radio spectrum.

Officially on the air since the beginning of December, KGGV has been developing over the past few years mostly through the efforts of professional radio engineer Randy Wells and a committed group of supporters, including Larry Lane. Beth Hearn, an energetic administrator with a background in fundraising, heads the organizing committee.

The Guerneville Community Church on Armstrong Woods Road holds the license to operate the station. In fact, everything you hear thus far on The Bridge, located at 95.1 on the FM band, is broadcast from a CD deck that sits in a broom closet in the Birkhofer Social Hall of the church.

According to the organizers, small communities need their own public stations because the locally owned commercial station is a thing of the past. When Randy Wells was a child in Oakland, improvising radio broadcasts from his rooftop, many small towns had local stations that served as community bulletin boards. There was even a station in Monte Rio KVRV.

But the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) eliminated low power stations in 1978 and Monte Rio's little station was transformed into a major player in Sonoma County broadcasting called The River.

But as the FCC relaxed residency requirements for radio station owners, corporations gobbled up the local stations. Many stations are now operated nationally and are not the kind of stations where, Wells laments, "You can call in for neighbors to look for your lost dog." Nor can you hear a rebroadcast of the local meeting you couldn't attend on such stations. Local programming is virtually impossible under these circumstances.

Due to the rise of "pirate" stations operating without licenses and grassroots pressure from all over the country to counter the tide of corporate takeovers, the FCC agreed to set aside frequencies for hundreds of low power FM stations in 2001.

Under FCC regulations, however, the low power stations must be non-commercial, educational entities, which means no advertising, and exclusively local programming. Like other public stations, they can sell memberships and accept underwriting, but the licenses are not transferable.

Wells says the big broadcasters are not thrilled with this change of events, as it "dilutes their audiences." For the community, however, KGGV can provide what Hearn calls "an organic, home-grown radio station, for locals, by locals."

The Bridge, like other LPFM stations, has a 10-20 mile broadcast radius from Duncan Mills to the Hacienda Bridge. It's approximately the same area as the Russian River Redevelopment project, whose oversight committee recommended to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors that redevelopment money be given to the station for an Emergency Alert System Decoder. That recommendation was approved on Jan. 23, with support from the Sonoma County Sheriff's Department. The Decoder can pick up emergency broadcasts including Amber Alerts about missing children.

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A \$2,061 grant from the Sonoma County Foundation also allowed the station to purchase and install a transmitting antenna atop a redwood tree on the south side of the church. Station organizers plan to convert an old tool shed on the property into a broadcast studio.

Donations, mostly from Wells himself, have also allowed the station to do "Remote Broadcasting." That means it can go out into the community and broadcast directly from meetings, from the street, and perhaps even on the Russian River itself.

The committee running the station is enthusiastic and hopeful about the future, but it's looking for people outside of the church community to get involved in the monthly meetings. The next meeting will be held on Friday Feb. 10 in the church's Birkhoffer Hall. They want it to be "real radio people relating to people," according to Hearn.

The group estimates that it will need about \$20,000 for the first year of operation. The

members are grateful that Wells has donated so much of his own equipment, but they really want a larger community to get involved to keep the station afloat.

Right now, programming consists mainly of Big Band music played from CDs in that small closet. The choice of Big Band music is related to the history of Big Bands playing in the River area in the 1940s. But Hearn, along with church and committee members Megan Hope and Kit Mariah, suggested many ideas for future programming, including live broadcasts of music from the Blue Heron, one-act plays, talk shows, history and cooking programs and interviews of community elders.

Mariah and Hope were first bitten by the radio "bug" when they were interviewed on a Santa Rosa station after they returned from the Gay Games in Sydney, Australia a few years ago. Mariah is a musician who appears at Open Mikes at the Main Street Station and Megan a communications major at Sonoma State University.

According to Hearn, some members of the Community Church had reservations when Randy Wells first approached them to be the nonprofit entity to sponsor the radio station. Though

there was always a fair amount of enthusiasm for the possibilities such a venture could provide including broadcasting church services to the homebound Hearn said, "There was also a fair amount of concern regarding liability. This wasn't the kind of operation the church had ever been involved with before."

Being run by a church, albeit a very "liberal, inclusive church in which many atheists participate," Hearn said, "we want programming to be tolerant, inclusive, but also not offensive to anyone."

The organizers named the station The Bridge because "the goal is to be a bridge between all segments of our River community," she continued.

The Bridge committee looks forward to being inundated by suggestions for programming and offers from volunteer disc jockeys. But more urgently, it is looking for people to help administer the station, and financial donations to keep it going.

Interested people can reach The Bridge by calling 869-1131, writing to P.O. Box 1131 Guerneville, logging onto [www.KGGV.org](http://www.KGGV.org) or attending the Feb. 10 meeting. ■