

Swaziland: Government disqualifies radio licence applicants

MBABANE: The process to award four community radio licences approved by the Swazi government in October 2008, has plunged into uncertainty. This follows a statement issued on 5 February 2009 by the Swaziland Radio Regulator stating that the four applicants short-listed for the licences have been disqualified as opposed to having their applications suspended.

The managing director of the Swaziland Posts and Telecommunications Corporation (SPTC), Nathi Dlamini, whose office acts as the Radio Regulator, has called for new applications for the licences.

The disqualified applicants are Lubombo Community Radio, Matsanjeni Community Radio, Ngwempisi Community Radio and One FM commercial radio station.

The regulator said the four applicants have been disqualified for failure to meet 12 critical dimensions of the evaluation criteria. They needed to prove the following in their applications:

- Access to technical expertise and experience
- Proof of financial capacity to undertake the business venture
- Market analysis
- Financial projection (for the next three years)
- Equipment compliance with international technical standards
- Demonstrable ability to commence service within three months
- Technical feasibility
- Efficient utilisation of spectrum
- Proof of registration including 50% local ownership
- Programming schedule (including public service obligation)
- Governance with meaningful participation
- At least 50% local shareholding

"It is regrettable to note at this stage that none of the community radio broadcasting station applicants met the basic criteria for even proceeding to the stage of evaluation, even after they were telephonically contacted," Dlamini said in his statement.

He added: "It is also regrettable and unfortunate as a result that it has become necessary to advise all applicants that their applications have been disqualified. In light of the foregoing they are, however, encouraged to re-apply following the rules of entry. It is hoped that the applicants will this time around make an effort to supply the basic information to qualify for the evaluation stage."

Dlamini said his office believes in strict adherence to guidelines and the principle of a fair and transparent process.

One of the applicants, One FM, the commercial broadcaster, has declared that it was going back to the drawing board and will certainly re-apply, this time around fulfilling all the requirements. One of its directors is ex-Minister for Information, S'gayoyo Magongo, who initiated the opening of the radio airwaves. He was upbeat about their chances in the second round.

But the community radio stations said it was difficult for them to meet the requirements because they rely on donor funding and no donor would want to commit himself with funds in the absence of a licence. They said they, therefore, cannot meet most of the requirements appealing to the regulator to consider their situation.

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