TESTIMONY
HOWARD BLUMENTHAL, INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
NEW JERSEY PUBLIC BROADCASTING AUTHORITY
SENATE BUDGET AND APPROPRIATION COMMITTEE
TUESDAY, APRIL 20, 2010

Thank you, Chairman Sarlo, and members of the Senate Budget and Appropriation Committee, for the opportunity to appear before this distinguished body.

Seven months ago, I joined NJN as Interim Executive Director. I was charged by the NJPBA to manage the organization and to build a long-term plan for the future of NJN.

Since this is the first time we’ve met, please allow me to share the range of experience that I bring to NJN, an organization now entering a period of change.

I worked on the team that developed MTV and Nickelodeon. I’ve created and produced series and specials for Food Network, History Channel, Showtime, HBO Family, and more—including a very popular PBS series that won the Peabody Award (television’s equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize), Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego? As a member of the senior management team for several large companies, I’ve restructured organizations in new media, television, and publishing. As the author of This Business of Television, now published by Random House, I’m often asked to work
with media companies in times of change. I’m delighted to be a part of NJN, and I hope I can make a difference for the people of New Jersey. Here’s why.

In terms of reach, NJN is the largest public television station in the country—serving a population that is more diverse, better educated, and more philanthropic than the national average. I’ve been very impressed by the quality of the staff, the production capability, the connection to the community—NJN is an industry leader. And, NJN is one of the few stations that produces a daily news program—and NJN is well-respected for its work in documentaries, education, and community service.

Of course, times are changing—the media business has been utterly transformed by new ways to produce and distribute programming. In order to prepare for the future, NJN’s management team spent the last few months of 2009 on an intensive analysis of every NJN revenue and expense activity. And in January, more than half the staff joined together to build a new Operating Plan for a new NJN.

Our process engaged community members; both of our Boards (our Foundation Board, which raises money, and our Authority Board, which provides governance); and staff members in what became an institution-wide planning process. Last week, we distributed a good solid discussion draft to the Boards and some staff for their comments, guidance, and as applicable, approval. As we have been
doing for months, we will continue to revise the document based upon the valuable input that we receive from stakeholders.

The plan includes dozens of new concepts for New Jersey-centric programs and projects, plans to work with partners throughout the State, and much more. And now, we’re beginning to build the budget and business plans that we’ll need to transform the Operating Plan into action.

In the interim, Governor Christie’s Authorities Transition Team recommended, in its transition report issued on January 22, 2010, that: “In order to save taxpayer dollars, a goal should be to make NJN self-reliant during the first term.”

More recently, in the Governor’s Budget Address, the Governor stated that “New Jersey Network can and will succeed as an independent not-for-profit, and we should free it to pursue that path.” The proposed State budget calls for a reduction in NJN’s State appropriation by 50%, from about $4.0 million to $2.0 million. The 2011 Budget in Brief states, “This reduction assumes that the State of New Jersey will no longer be in the public television business after December 31, 2010, and that NJN will operate independently as of January 1, 2011.”

As we understand it, NJN’s relationship with the State of New Jersey may change, but its relationship with the people of New Jersey would remain the same. NJN’s mission would remain as well:
to educate, inform, entertain and make New Jersey a better place. NJN is a nonprofit for the public good.

NJN is currently preparing its FY 2011 budget, which is not complete because there are several unanswered questions related to fundamental planning issues. These include assumptions regarding personnel, contracts, facilities, licenses, tangible and intangible assets, public service issues, and certain revenue streams. As these assumptions are finalized, we will complete NJN’s FY2011 Operating Budget so that the people of New Jersey continue to enjoy their own public broadcasting service.

In order to succeed, NJN must focus on news and public affairs, and a healthy amount of New Jersey-centric programming and projects for every platform. It’s not just about television anymore. It’s about television and the internet, TV sets in living rooms and mobile video devices like the iPhone and the iPad. It’s about community events. It’s about capturing the imagination of the audience in a competitive media marketplace with programs about New Jersey’s foods and ethnic cultures; our fresh foods movement; our diverse families; our strong connection to New Jersey’s environment, which is, as you probably know, fairly deeply involved with water, rivers, and ocean—and drives recreation, travel, economic development, jobs, and more. NJN must be a part of all of that, and more.

I could go on about NJN’s creative plans for the future, but this is a budget meeting, and these topics are best discussed in another
venue. I look forward to discussing NJN’s plans with each of you in the near future. And I look forward to working with all of you as we write a new and exciting chapter in NJN’s history.