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The Skanner Newspaper, established in October 1975, is a weekly publication, published each Wednesday by IMM Publications Inc.,
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The Skanner is a member of the National Newspaper Publishers Association and West Coast Black Publishers Association.
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Comcast, FCC Too Cozy for Comfort

From the Publisher
Bernie Foster

In January, the Federal Communications Commission approved a controversial deal allowing telecommunications giant Comcast to buy broadcaster NBC. Last week, FCC Commissioner Meredith Attwell Baker, one of the strongest advocates for the $13.7 billion deal, announced she was leaving the FCC for a top lobbying job with Comcast—NBC. Talk about a hit and run.

Here at *The Skanner News*, it's hard for us to believe that the fix wasn't in from the start. It's hard to believe that Attwell Baker had no idea that she was going to work for this company within four months. We suspect this was prearranged early in the game.

Federal Communications Commissioners are supposed to protect the interests of the American public. They are charged with upholding laws designed to curb monopolies, promote fair competition and prevent industry abuses. That's why it matters when a commissioner supports policy that benefits a giant corporation, and then moves into a highly-paid position with that corporation. Something here looks and smells….

What's to stop future FCC Commissioners from doing favors for the corporations? After all, a few months down the line, they'll be the next ones in line for an industry lobbying job.

Ms. Attwell Baker is hardly the first person to skip through the revolving door between a federal agency and the industry it regulates. Former FCC chair Michael Powell now earns millions as the top lobbyist for National Cable and Telecom - munications Association, for example. And similar sleazy stories have emerged from the FDA, the Department of the Interior, the EPA and…the list goes on.

It's beyond time for Congress to regulate the regulators. We need a law that makes it illegal for regulators to work for any company they regulate for at least two years.

Here in Oregon, the Metropolitan Exposition and Recreation Commission passed a rule that commissioners cannot lobby for industry companies for at least one year after their service. I know because I was one of the Commissioners who made that rule. And we are talking about fairly small budget local government here. Not a national agency with the power to approve multi-billion dollar deals.

The Comcast-NBC deal struck many consumer advocates as counter to the public interest for several reasons. High-speed internet is now a utility, as crucial to families, businesses and communities as gas or electricity. But as previously reported in *The Skanner News*, a small group of telecommunication companies (Comcast, AT&T, Verizon and Time Warner Cable) own most of the cables that deliver this service. And in many parts of the country consumers have no choice of broadband provider, because one company with no competition serves that region. Now imagine that company also owns its own content – as Comcast now owns NBC. Do you really believe that they won't be tempted to do anything at all to prioritize NBC content over competitor and independently created content?

> Self-interest tied to corporate interests makes one unfit to serve the public

Ms. Atwell Baker couldn't see any problem. Instead she argued that consumers would see benefits from the Comcast NBC merger. She said nothing about going to work for Comcast.

Of course, she has a right to her opinion. Diversity of opinion is part of any democracy. But as an FCC regulator, she has a duty not to let the prospect of a fat corporate paycheck influence her vote. Frankly, it is now hard to believe she was not just voting the industry ticket all the way along.

Apologists for this corrupt system argue that it is the only way to keep the brightest and best in government. We say: anyone whose self-interest is tied to corporate interests is unfit to serve the public. Congress should act immediately to shut the revolving door.

Do you think Commissioner Attwell Baker was too cozy with Comcast when she voted in their favor? Yes or No.

You can post your comments on www.theskanner.com

Students

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University are trying to raise money to help the Libyan students, said Darin Watkins, a WSU spokesman.

A letter sent to Libyan-North American Scholarship Program students at WSU included a list of area social service organizations, including the state Department of Social and Health Services and a food bank.

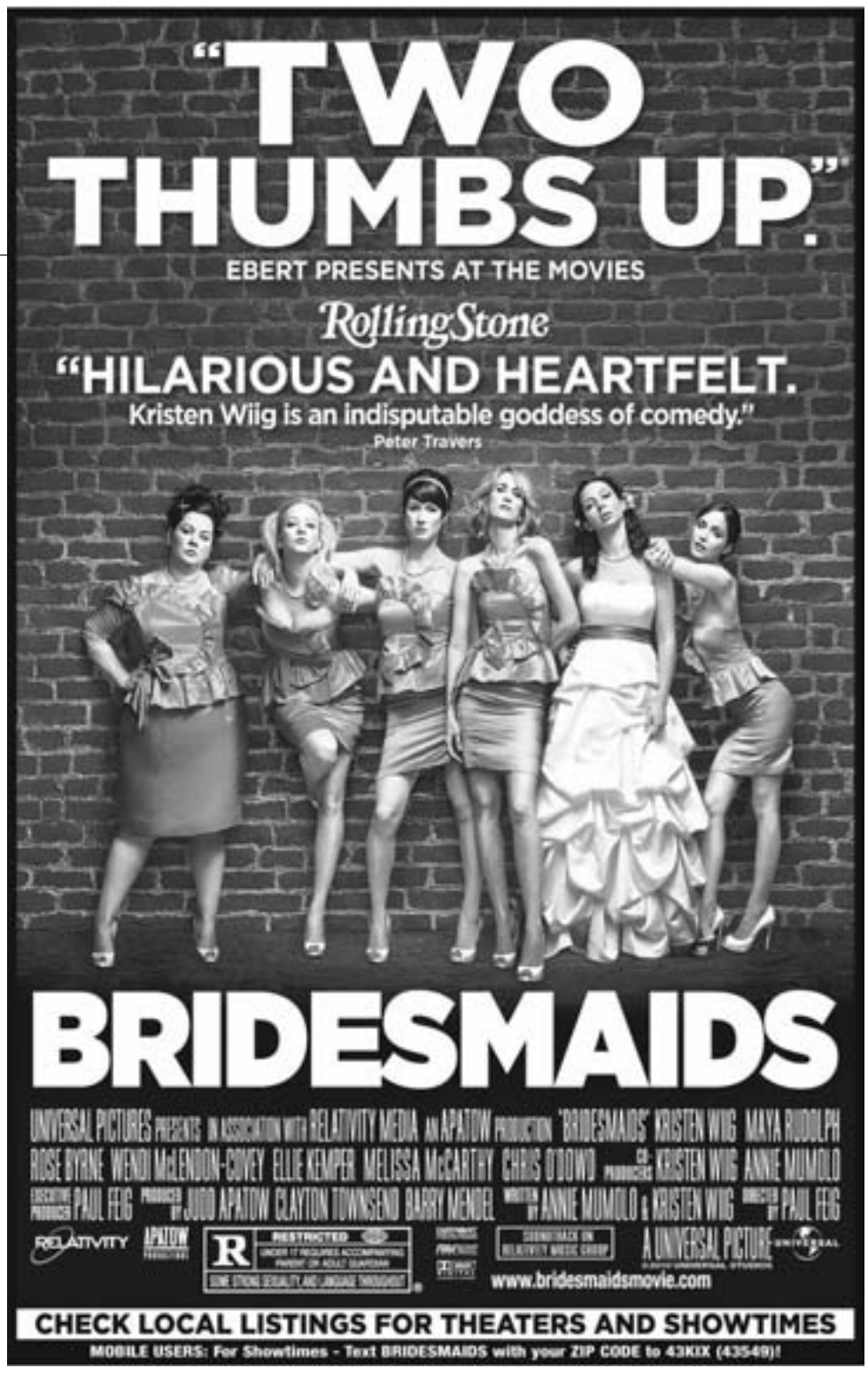
"At this point of uncertainty, you must begin planning for the scholarship program discontinuation," WSU Provost Warwick M. Bayly wrote in the letter. "Unfortunately, WSU is not able to provide stipends, tuition scholarships, free or deferred rent, or health insurance to students and families who had previously received funding" through the Canadian Bureau for International Education.

Kemale Pinar, director of U.S. Operations for the Canadian Bureau for International Education, which distributes the funds, said she could not comment on the problems.

The CBIE sent a letter to its students last week warning that it was running out of funds.

"It is important for CBIE to prepare for a scenario in which we do not receive new funding by May 31 and therefore we are currently exploring ways to pay for June health insurance premiums and monthly living allowances,'" the letter said.

In March, the U.N. froze Libyan assets in an attempt to keep them from Gadhafi.

The Libyan-North American Scholarship Program is a joint collaboration between Libya, Canada and host universities in Canada and the United States.

Candace Chenoweth, director of the Office of International Students and Scholars at WSU, said university leaders are meeting with students to discuss legal options that would allow them to remain in the U.S., if the funding remains frozen.