

New station moves ahead



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For a couple of years, we've been following the ongoing professional struggles of Ron Castro, for years the highly rated morning man on Oakland's KSAN-FM, in his quest to buy his own radio station.

Believe me, it's more than a little unusual for a jock to own a station, leave alone for air talent to even venture into the business side of that industry.

As we reported here a while back, Castro finally got his license and his station after about a decade of hard work, headaches, and anxieties. Castro had to fight off challenges from other potential licensees also eager to acquire the last radio frequency available in the Bay Area. The fact that it was an FM license in these FM-dominated days made it that much more appealing.

To make a long story short, Castro had to slap another mortgage on his house to pay for all his FCC legal bills. He also had to join forces with two other prospective licensees to assure a good shot at getting the frequency at 105.1.

And worst, Castro was fired by KSAN long before he got the license because KSAN apparently feared he might some day be a direct competitor. KSAN was right. Castro's station, KRFP-FM, known as "Q-105," adopted a country format, got good ratings its first time out, and now seriously threatens to erode KSAN's strong ratings in Sonoma County.

I ventured up to Rohnert Park to see Castro's new station, where the deep-throated DJ still does morning drive to save costs.

Rohnert Park scarcely even existed 10 years ago; now it's part of the booming southern Sonoma County population corridor along Highway 101. Rohnert Park's modest past is probably best exemplified by the sign you see along 101 as you enter its city limits:

It says "Rohnert Park" in big letters. In smaller letters, the word "Bowling" appears. In tiny letters is the word "Golf." (Yeah, bowling really brings those revenues and prestige to a town, doesn't it? Forget those two championship golf courses that lure the well-heeled from as far away as the Eastbay.)

Amid Rohnert Park's suburban sprawl it was not surprising to locate Castro's radio station above a spa store. There is a fiberglass hot tub leaning against the building's front, in fact.

But don't be too quick to laugh at Castro's circumstances. He may not be technically in "big-time" radio right now, but the kind of money that's been offered to him for the station isn't chump change.

At lunch Castro told me, "We've had several calls from investors. A couple of offers have been unbelievable. Two, even three million dollars."

This is no doubt due to the area's huge growth projections. "I guess I could probably be a millionaire — on paper, anyway," smiles Castro, who claims he has no intention to sell his hard-earned property.

The reason Castro is in such a fine financial position is that he didn't pay \$2 million or \$3 million for the station — he and his partners built it from scratch, a rarity. "So our debt service is pretty low, just some leases on our equipment."

The Reagan administration's virtually complete deregulation of radio has brought investors for broadcast properties — especially radio stations, which are a lot cheaper than TV stations — out of the woodwork. Now virtually anyone can buy radio properties — even, unbelievably, those with criminal records.

Just as bad, you can now turn right around and sell a license, too, as witness the KDIA-KFYI debacle. Radio stations today are, sadly, quickly becoming just another commodity — not unlike pork bellies.

But this abundance of potential investors is good news to Castro, who could become a wealthy man because of deregulation. Right man in the right place at the right time, and all that.

Castro is also interested in acquiring a Sonoma County AM license at current AM bargain-basement rates to complement his FM — just like KSAN-FM/KNEW-AM's potent country-music "combo."

Which brings me to the next question. I've heard reports that Castro decided to make his new station a country outlet at least partially out of revenge toward KSAN, which he feels dumped him unreasonably.

Was revenge a motive?

Castro's eyes twinkle and he smiles. "Well, it might have had something to do with our programming decision."

Local columnist Bill Mann appears Tuesdays through Fridays in the Lifestyle section and Sundays in the Calendar entertainment section.