

KBOB radio personality Mike Kenneally has reason to be unhappy with his employer. He was let go from the country station in January 1999 because management was “basically firing salaries,” he said. When he was re-hired in August with a pay cut, he says he was verbally promised some things by Connoisseur Communications, the station’s owner. Those things never happened, he claims. But, “I’ve never been happier,” Kenneally said. Kenneally is still doing the morning drive for Connoisseur’s KBOB, which has moved to 104.9 on the dial. And although Connoisseur still plans to sell its five Quad Cities radio stations to Cumulus Broadcasting, the deal hasn’t happened yet. So Kenneally is still technically working for the same people. When Cumulus announced six months ago that it had reached an agreement to buy Connoisseur Communications’ 37 radio stations, most people thought it was a done deal. And when Cumulus made wholesale changes at those stations in late March, listeners probably figured new owners were aboard. But the deal is on hold. While Cumulus is operating the five local radio stations, Connoisseur still owns them, and a sale that was supposed to be completed by the end of May will likely have to wait until late fall. On May 11, Milwaukee-based Cumulus announced that it and Connoisseur had extended the deadline for finalizing the sale. Cumulus now expects the deal to be sealed in the late third quarter of early fourth quarter of 2000. At press time, Cumulus had not responded to questions submitted by the River Cities’ Reader asking about the reasons for the delay. But Larry Rosmilso, operations director for eight radio stations run by the competing Quad Cities Radio Group, said Cumulus doesn’t “have the money to close the deal.” He added that Cumulus is trying to unload some other properties to raise enough cash to complete the purchase. More than two months have passed since Cumulus Broadcasting shook up the five Quad Cities radio stations it’s working to buy, dumping adult contemporary KQLI 104.9 FM (Connoisseur’s lowest-rated FM station), switching KBOB to that frequency, and adding Top 40 KBEA to KBOB’s old 99.7 FM slot. Cumulus also changed the format of KORB 93.5 FM from pop alternative to harder, guitar-heavy “active rock” and shifted and added radio personalities. But despite some uncertainty about Cumulus’ ability to finish the sale, the stations the company is operating, and their competitors, are excited about the Cumulus takeover. Kenneally said he has a “greater degree of creativity” under Cumulus management, that he can have fun and not worry about doing everything in 15 or 20 seconds. Cumulus managers “have their fingers on the pulse” of the radio stations, but they’re “down-to-earth, low-control people,” he said. “It’s a very exciting time,” said Steve Gunner, operations manager for the five local stations Cumulus is presently running for Connoisseur, which is selling its 37 stations for \$247 million. “This isn’t a company that takes over stations ... to lose. It’s a whole new feeling.” Gunner said that the problems Cumulus is facing haven’t affected operations at his stations, and added that employees aren’t worried about the trouble — or their paychecks bouncing. “Those issues need to be addressed, and they have been in meetings,” he said. It’s easy to imagine that the relatively small Quad Cities Radio Group might be scared of Cumulus, which owns about 300 stations in about 60 markets. Not so. “All of last year and the year before, our juices weren’t flowing,” Rosmilso said. “We get fired up when a new guy comes into town. ... It makes us better.” That might sound like spin, but Rosmilso sounded sincere when asked whether he wanted the sale of Connoisseur’s properties to Cumulus to go through: “I would hope so. ... Cumulus is a company that offers a lot of good things to radio. ... I would rather have a competitor in the market who is serious about running radio stations.” While nobody interviewed for this story said anything negative about Connoisseur, nobody said anything more than lukewarm positive, either. “We’re finally putting ... all the right pieces together to be competitive,” Gunner said. More lively competition certainly

cannot hurt a market dominated by Quad Cities Radio Group. The company runs seven of the eight highest-rated stations in the market, and those stations' Arbitron ratings largely remained steady or grew from the fall 1998 to '99 sampling periods. By contrast, only fourth-place 97X, billed as the Quad Cities' rock station, got a significantly higher share in 1999 than 1998 for Connoisseur. Not coincidentally, 97X is the only Connoisseur FM station that Cumulus mostly left alone. "There are some areas that have a pretty big [ratings] gap," Gunner conceded. There's no way to tell yet whether Cumulus' changes have nabbed any more listeners. Arbitron has two ratings periods for the Quad Cities media market, and the spring numbers won't be released for at least another month. "We don't have any way of telling, except the buzz on the street, request lines," Gunner said. He added that he's encouraged by what he's seen so far. "Bob Country seems to have a better response," he said. Cumulus' changes might help local bands, but that's a function of a format change more than anything else, according to Gunner. As The Planet, 93.5 FM focused on alternative hits, which pretty much precluded local artists. The station's new active-rock format makes it a little easier for local bands to get airplay. But Gunner claimed he and 93.5's program director don't receive many CDs from local acts. "I can't remember the last local recording I received," he said, adding that he's not sure whether that's because of a "lack of a big music scene, or a lack of me getting stuff." To get on 93.5, a local band would need to have a guitar-based sound that fits with the active-rock format, said Gunner, who encouraged bands to send him their recordings. "I don't know how many bands have CDs," he said, although "I love to go out and see live music." Gunner said 93.5 is presently considering adding a local music show, but he wouldn't commit to it because the station wouldn't be able to fill a show week after week with the recordings it has. "We've always had some sort of outlet for local music," he added. "Not as much as some people like." The Quad Cities Radio Group has no plans to play local artists, Rosmilso said. "It's like driving side roads rather than the superhighway," he said. "It might take you where you want to go, but it's going to take you longer. ... We cater to the masses, not the niche." Listeners and music are only part of the equation, though. What matters is money, and that comes from higher ad rates that result from higher ratings. The Cumulus stations might benefit from the frequency shifting. KBOB (104.9) is now right next to its FM country competitor WLLR (103.7), and the new KBEA (99.7) is doing battle with Top 40 counterpart WHTS (98.9) on a small piece of radio real estate. The two Quad Cities Radio Group stations top the market's ratings. "It certainly helps" to have some stations grouped with other stations with similar formats, Gunner said. "Is it coincidence? That's classified information." "Being one tick away isn't a new idea," said Jim O'Hara, program director for Quad Cities Radio Group's WLLR and KMXG. The Quad Cities Radio Group has reason to be confident. Not only does it already rule the market, its signals are significantly stronger. All the company's FM stations broadcast at 100,000 watts, while only Connoisseur's KBEA has that power. In that context, it's almost impossible for Cumulus to take over as the Quad Cities' dominant radio force in the short run. But all it needs to boost revenues is to chip away at its chief competitor's ratings. And it's possible that someday, with enough resources and broadcasting power, Cumulus could be fighting for first place instead of third or fourth. But the logical first step is completing the sale.