



EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT

Information Technology Division

Memorandum

To: City Council
From: Sanford Hess, Jason Liggett, Jake Schumacher
Regarding: Feasibility of a New Public Access TV Channel
Date: August 14, 2019

Council Members,

In February, we presented a plan to research the feasibility of launching a new public access channel in our community. The plan seeks a community partner to take on the supervision and programming of a new fifth channel for public access.

This memo is a status report and summary of findings so far.

The Proposed Timeline presented in February was:

January – July 2019 – Jason and Jake will solicit inputs from the UPTV commission, cable providers, UPTV members, and others. *This was completed and a summary appears below.*

July 2019 - January 2020 - Jason and Jake will work with the UPTV Commission to develop a recommendation to the Mayor for the best partner to take over the fifth channel and will propose a transition plan of operating the fifth channel.

Should a partner NOT be found, then the Urbana City Council can either increase funding for UPTV or eliminate Public Access programming. This will be addressed as part of the FY 2021 budget.

Status Report: Research and development of a new public access channel

Since February, we have met with our cable providers, UPTV members and the UPTV Commission to envision a new public access channel. Here are some key findings:

Comcast - Once the City makes their initial request for a fifth channel, Comcast has 30 days to provide the City with the cost of launching the channel. These costs would include a transmitter and receiver, currently estimated at \$1,750. The City would also need to cover the cost of any fiber installation. The channel location would be in the three-digit tier 100-999 and would be offered in either “Digital Basic” or “Digital Starter” (“Digital Extra”) package.

i3 Broadband - Once the City makes their initial request for a fifth channel, i3 Broadband has 30 days to provide the City with the cost of launching the channel. If i3 Broadband already has fiber run to the location of the channel, there would not be need for a build out. However, if new fiber has to be run, the City or the new provider will bear the cost of any build out. The City would need

to pay the cost of the encoder, currently estimated at \$1,500. The City can choose the channel location as long as it is not already home to another channel. The standard definition channel would be between 0-399. The high definition channel would be above 400. The channel would be carried on their “Must Watch” package.

AT&T U-Verse - The City would need to fill out and submit a PEG service request form at least three months in advance of requested in-service date. Their engineer would then engage with City staff and other interested parties about implementation. AT&T would cover the cost of the encoder. The Illinois state video franchise legislation allows the City to have up to three PEG channels, which could result in a total of six for Champaign-Urbana. The two cities currently have four combined channels. The new channel would be a part of the channel 99 PEG lineup on AT&T U-Verse.

UPTV Commission – The UPTV Commission hopes there is a way to preserve providing public access television service to our community. In the shrinking local media climate, public access has a growing importance. The Commission expressed concern about the sustainability of another organization providing public access service if they didn’t have adequate funding for staff.

UPTV Membership Meeting - We met with UPTV producers and community members on February 23, 2019. We presented our additional PEG channel timeline and brainstormed ideas about what they would like to see in a community access center. Our producers expressed the importance of physical space. They are appreciative of the space the City provides, but find it too constraining. They would like both a small studio for day to day productions and a larger studio for musical performances, live audiences and panel discussions. There is desire for a television studio, audio recording booth, and a larger space to be used for meetings, community engagement and as a performance center.

UPTV producers understand the need for an expanded budget to meet their space and staffing desires. The new media access center would need a stable and proven funding structure. Pay-to-play phone apps, underwriting sponsorships and paid productions were suggested as revenue sources. Some members expressed concern about sponsorships, as they want to ensure the public access channel is free from commercial influence on programming decisions. Ideally, a staff person focusing on fundraising would be a good fit for a new channel. If a membership fee were assessed, members want to make sure the fee is not a deterrent for people to create media.

Meeting with Durl Kruse – UPTV Station Manager Jason Liggett met with community member Durl Kruse in March. If another organization were to operate a new public access channel, Durl wants the organization to be in Urbana. If the organization is in Champaign, Durl thinks the City of Champaign should provide funding for operations. He worries about a non-profit organization maintaining public access due to financial struggles, and believes that the City of Urbana must fund the public access channel adequately. He would like to see a portion of the City’s 5% franchise fee go towards funding the channel. Durl would like to see a planned equipment replacement schedule and funding for staff through a contract between the City and the separate organization. He would like us to further explore equipment and staff costs before any organization agrees to a contract.

Feedback from Carl Estabrook - Carl has always been pleased with the performance of City staff operating the public access portions. He would like to see a friends group formed to support the City’s continued operation of public access television.

Our Next Steps

UPTV Management has contacted the Urbana Free Library, Champaign Public Library, UIUC Media Commons, Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center, WEFT, and UI-7 to gauge their interest in managing a new public access television channel. We hope to have proposals from more than one organization. We will solicit input from stakeholders: the City, the UPTV Commission and our current members, to evaluate for best fit those local organizations, which have:

- Significant involvement with the widest variety of community segments;
- Interest, and preferably expertise, in digital media of some sort;
- A commitment to free speech and active representation of differing viewpoints.

We will report our findings to the Council in January.