

**CHAMPAIGN-URBANA CABLE AND
TELECOMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
STUDY SESSION MINUTES**

DATE: October 13, 2004
4:00 PM

PLACE: City Council Chambers
102 N. Neil Street, Champaign, IL

MEMBERS PRESENT:	CHAMPAIGN	URBANA
	Karen Walker	Barbara Gladney Jim Hayes Kevin Maxson
	PARKLAND	U OF I
	Tom McDonnell	Stan Yagi

MEMBERS ABSENT: Rick Atterberry, Brian Silverman, Giraldo Rosales,
Peter Resnick

STAFF PRESENT: Chris Foster - City of Urbana
Jeff Hamilton - City of Champaign

CALL TO ORDER

Vice-Chairman Maxson called the study session meeting of the Champaign-Urbana Cable and Telecommunications Commission to order at 4:04 PM.

SET AGENDA FOR THE OCTOBER 20, 2004 REGULAR MEETING

- Vice-Chairman Maxson presented a draft agenda for the Commission's October 20, 2004 regular meeting.
- Jeff Hamilton suggested adding the Commission's annual budget request to the agenda. Addition was accepted.
- There were no other corrections or additions to the agenda at this time.

STUDY SESSION ON PUBLIC ACCESS TELEVISION

Introduction

Commissioner Gladney explained the Commission needed to start reviewing the need for a public access television channel in Champaign-Urbana now, in advance of franchise renewal negotiations. Commissioner Gladney recommended the Commission consider advocating for at least one public access channel in the next franchise agreement, to serve both Champaign and Urbana. She further recommended that the community begin to come together to discuss, organize, and create a demand for a public access channel.

Champaign-Urbana PEG Channels

Channel 5 - Jeff Hamilton was introduced as the coordinator for Champaign's Cable Channel 5. Mr. Hamilton explained that Channel 5 is a government access channel, which does not have a public access component in its current mission. Channel 5 is shared with Champaign's government partners, including the Unit 4 school district, County Board, etc. Channel 5 maintains an extensive tape archive of past City meetings. The public is welcome to receive a free copy of any of these meetings, provided the request is accompanied with a blank VHS cassette for the tape dub.

Channel 6 - Chris Foster was introduced as the coordinator for UPTV – Urbana's Cable Channel 6. Mr. Foster explained that Channel 6 is a government, education, and public access channel. Channel 6 televises most Urbana City meetings and other City-produced programming, including press conferences, Urbana history programming, etc. Channel 6 also runs the Urbana School Board meetings and shows Annenberg satellite programming.

Channel 7 -- Carl Caldwell was introduced as the Commission's contact for UI-7 – University of Illinois' Cable Channel 7. Mr. Caldwell explained UI-7 is a 24-hour a day educational channel which shows predominantly international news programming. Some U of I student programming is also shown on Channel 7, and they plan to put more student produced programming on the channel in the years ahead.

Channel 9 – Commissioner Gladney explained she is the coordinator for PCETV – Parkland College's Cable Channel 9. The channel is an educational channel showcasing Parkland programming and Classic Arts Showcase satellite programming.

Public Access Forum

Professor Robert McChesney was introduced as the featured speaker for the public access forum. Professor McChesney explained that public access channels are very important to our community. He shared that PEG channels are not a gift from, but are the responsibility of cable operators in exchange for the cable TV monopoly we allow them to have on our communities. He said that municipalities don't ask for enough PEG resources during franchise renewals. He said that when communities get organized and make demands of cable operators, the operators "always" give in. He stated that PEG channels are traditionally marginal because of poor funding, content, and they don't fill a strong niche. He feels this is changing and the channels are more important now than ever before. Changes in media ownership rules have allowed large corporations to take over broadcast stations across the United States. This makes local channels, including PEG channels, much more valuable and important to our community.

Professor McChesney explained that UPTV had recently had problems because the channel is not run by an independent, non-profit group. He then discussed the program "Democracy Now" which has been an object of controversy at UPTV. He feels the program is being mischaracterized as a "liberal equivalent of Rush Limbaugh or Bill O'Reilly". He states the program is a journalism show, not a political show. He shared that partisan journalism was the mainstream prior to 1920, when professional journalism emerged. He said that "Democracy Now" is critical of everyone in power and is not an

opinion show, it is a true journalism show in which they investigate and break the news. He explains this is a real asset to the community, but not common among local and national journalists.

Carl Caldwell added that public broadcasting funding sometimes gets caught up in politics too. Professor McChesney feels this is “outrageous” and that we should model PBS after other public broadcasting systems around the world. The BBC has a formal review every 10 years, which gives them some autonomy from British Parliament, yet keeps them accountable too. He explained that the BBC is funded much better than Public Broadcasting in the US.

Commissioner Gladney asked what we can do about large media corporations like Sinclair. Professor McChesney explained that Sinclair owns 62 television channels, including one in Champaign, has elected to show an anti-John Kerry documentary on every one of their TV channels. He said that television broadcasters are not allowed to use their channels to push one political candidate over another, and that Sinclair is violating the spirit of that law by not giving John Kerry equal time to respond. He added that if President Bush wins re-election, Sinclair will push his administration to eliminate all media ownership restrictions. He stated that severe media concentration in Germany aided the rise of Adolph Hitler and the Nazi movement leading up to World War II. Upon Germany’s defeat, the Allies put restrictions on German media concentration because this is “not conducive to democracy and promotes fascism”. He then warned we should “take a dose of our own medicine”.

Carl Caldwell explained that PBS audience surveys show the public appreciates the high quality of PBS programming, but people admit they still won’t watch. He said that even with small audiences, what PEG channels and PBS offer is still very important.

UPTV Membership

Chris Foster said that there are currently no membership fees to become a member and that one can easily apply online or by contacting him. He explained that UPTV has camera equipment to checkout and digital editing equipment available for the public to use. He also offered that the public can simply bring in their completed shows for playback on Channel 6. A Public Access program is played one time per week.

Jeff Hamilton clarified that Urbana’s public access is available to residents of Champaign as well as Urbana. Mr. Foster then added that citizens of several outlying communities can also participate.

Commissioner Gladney said that the problems UPTV has seen lately are a result of operating a mixed government-public access channel. She offered that a separate public access channel would eliminate this problem.

Commissioner Hayes asked if UPTV could make copies of public access programs for the public. Mr. Foster explained copies can only be made with the permission of the producer.

Commissioner McDonnell asked if UPTV has a policy in place about playing non-locally produced programming like "Democracy Now". Mr. Foster responded that there are several programs that are imported and sponsored by local public access members. The issues raised by "Democracy Now" involved the method of delivery and frequency of airplay requested. The local sponsor wanted to mount a satellite dish at Urbana's City Hall to download the programming and also requested it be played five times a week. Because public access programs are only allowed to be aired once a week, the UPTV Commission is working to modify UPTV policy to accommodate "Democracy Now."

Audience Participation

Randall Cotton of Champaign offered comments about UPTV public access. He expressed concern that Urbana administration runs the channel and that this gives the Urbana Mayor too much power over the channel. Mr. Cotton is the public access member who is asking UPTV to play "Democracy Now." He stated that a petition signed by 1200 people was accepted by UPTV staff in May 2004 and he was promised "Democracy Now" could play on the channel. He stated that Urbana's Mayor then intervened to keep the program off the air, despite the unanimous support of the UPTV Commission. Mr. Cotton said this is a perfect example of the failure of public access in our community, at the hands of a single politician. He requested that the Commission push to create a new public access channel as a non-profit, member-run operation. He also questioned why the City of Champaign doesn't fund public access at all, and called upon them to use cable franchise fees and partner with Urbana to fund a separate public access channel.

Vice-Chairman Maxson thanked Mr. Cotton for his comments and suggested that he also approach both City Councils with his suggestions. Commissioner Gladney asked for Mr. Cotton to help get a not-for-profit organized to operate a public access station. Commissioner Gladney explained that she feels the franchise agreement's requirements before obtaining a new access channel are unrealistic. She suggested that the Commission may wish to simply ask Insight for another PEG channel anyway.

Vice-chairman Maxson then added an agenda item to the October 20, 2004 meeting, in which they would summarize this study session for the Commission members unable to attend.

Commissioner McDonnell pointed out that PEG channels are no longer required by federal regulations, and that some communities have bargained their PEG channels away in recent franchise renewals. He suggested that in order to get a new PEG channel, the community needs to speak up and pressure the cable provider. Commissioner Gladney suggested that the Commission should be firm in what they want to see during the franchise renewal, and let the Cities know this is an important issue.

Commissioner Walker stated that the PEG channels don't have a clear identity and that they need to be better marketed, so the public knows what PEG has to offer. Mr. Foster explained that UPTV has a ½ time marketing position, and a new ½ time outreach coordinator to assist in public access promotion and operations. Mr. Hamilton explained that Channel 5 has very limited staff and budgetary resources to expend on marketing. Commissioner Walker inquired about the Channel 5 survey on the City of Champaign's

web site. Mr. Hamilton explained that the survey had been well received, but the data had not yet been analyzed.

Mr. Cotton asked the Commission to move forward and ask Insight about the possibility of getting another PEG channel. Vice-chairman Maxson agreed that it was a good suggestion and they should ask Insight at their next regular meeting on October 20, 2004.

Commissioner Comments

There were no further discussions.

ADJOURNMENT

Vice-Chairman Maxson adjourned the meeting at 5:00 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeff Hamilton
Telecommunications/AV Technician
City of Champaign