

Updating Community TV Summary of Proposed Legislation

October 4, 2017

BACKGROUND

Community TV in Wisconsin serves a vital public information role on the local level, making local government transparent and enabling officials to talk directly to their residents in good times and during emergencies. Community TV provides a way to discuss issues of local, regional and statewide importance that can promote greater understanding and better solutions. Community TV also promotes involvement in and builds support for local schools, businesses, non-profit organizations, community activities, and the arts. Community TV creates quality professional jobs in our towns and provides job-training opportunities for high school and college students interested in careers in media and marketing. Children and adults trained at Community TV centers reap great personal satisfaction in producing programs for and about the communities they care about.

Local governments are choosing to invest in community television production for all these reasons and because many residents have come to rely on it. However, this financial investment is increasingly at risk because video providers are not making a similar investment in transmission. Unlike most other programming on cable TV, Community TV programs are not transmitted in HD, although most Community TV shows are produced in HD. Community TV program schedules are not included in the electronic program guide, although most stations use sophisticated digital scheduling platforms that would make it easy.

By failing to keep up with the times, video service providers are pushing away audiences for Community TV and causing local governments to question their investment. Action is needed.

PROPOSED LEGISLATION PROVISIONS

1. The bill would require video service providers to include Community TV program listings in the Electronic Program Guide (EPG). Cable subscribers routinely use the EPG to find and pick out TV shows to watch either in real time or to record for later viewing. However, video service providers have only permitted a few Community TV channels to get on the EPG with their program schedule, effectively blocking a subscriber's ability to find, view, and record Community TV shows of interest.

If a local government requests it, video service providers would be required to allow the program schedules of Community TV channels to appear in the Electronic Program Guide.

2. The bill would require video service providers to transmit Community TV channels with the same quality reception as the local broadcast channels on the lineup. Despite the fact that most Community TV centers record programming in the HD format, video service providers transmit community TV programs in the outdated SD format and their customers must settle for fuzzy-looking local programming on their made-for-HD-quality sets. In Wisconsin, two small video providers, Solarus and Tri-County Communications Cooperative transmit Community TV in HD, but the largest video service provider, Spectrum (Charter), does not.

3. The bill would give local governments the option to assess a 0.25% Community TV fee on the video portion of cable TV bills to raise funds for Community TV capital expenses. While the amount of the fee in this legislation would add only a few cents to each subscriber's monthly bill, the funds it would raise would be significant.

While this kind of fee (called a PEG fee) is allowed by federal law and is commonly assessed throughout the country, Wisconsin cities have not been able to collect it since 2011 due to 2007 Act 42. This law abrogated local franchise agreements and made state law the "franchise" video providers are governed by.

SUMMARY

These updates would markedly improve the Community TV service cable subscribers receive by improving reception, making programs easier to find, and enabling subscribers to record shows of interest. The Community TV Fee of a few cents each month would improve the amount and quality of local programming subscribers would receive. These changes would also boost the value of Community TV to local governments by making these channels much more likely to be used and viewed by residents.