

Comcast Cable contract up for renewal in 2009

By Neil Schulman

Long Branch — Comcast Cable and the Long Branch Cable Commission have begun looking at what will happen once the current contract with the city expires in 2009.

Some requests from residents as part of the renewal have included another channel specifically for the Long Branch schools, and for City Hall to be wired for broadcast capabilities.

The first steps in Comcast's negotiations with the city to continue its license have begun. On Jan. 9, the City Cable Commission held a public "ascertainment" hearing to get input from residents.

Commission member Don Swanson said the purpose of the group is to promote Long Branch's cable channel (channel 20 on Comcast), and to serve as a liaison between Comcast and the city.

Long Branch and Comcast will be negotiating the duration of the new contract, and what Comcast will offer in return. Currently, in addition to the channel, Comcast

pays a portion of the basic cable fees charged to city residents to Long Branch.

Whatever is decided, Comcast representative Robert Clifton said that the new agreement would be non-exclusive. In fact, groups don't even need to negotiate with municipalities to come in; they can make a state-wide agreement, as Verizon has done, he said.

"Comcast policy has been not to go the route that Verizon has chosen," but to work with individual cities, he said.

Clifton said that Comcast would be negotiating for a contract of up to 25 years. The more that they offered Long Branch, the longer they would want the agreement to last.

Several Long Branch school officials said they would like part of the negotiations to include another channel for use by the schools.

Both the new Long Branch High School and Long Branch Middle School have state-of-the-art production facilities, said Assistant Superintendent George Catrambone. Having their own

channel would be a tremendous benefit for the student.

"The opportunities for the students are monumental," he said. "Career pathways, motivation ... insight to journalism, communications, and public speaking."

Others at the meeting asked for City Council meetings to be broadcast.

"We've been trying to encourage them to broadcast this," said Harold Bobrow, who owns a home in Long Branch.

Clifton said that the wiring in City Hall might not be capable of transmitting this, but Bobrow said it was done by Comcast elsewhere.

"I have a home in Maplewood, and they can broadcast live," Bobrow said.

If that was not possible, Bobrow asked for tapes of the meetings to be broadcast.

Commission member Howard Marlin said that would involve some expense. He believes that, by law, the meeting would need to be broadcast "gavel to gavel," requiring at least a semi-professional production to ensure

decent sound and lighting throughout.

Other people requested that more shows be put on the Long Branch channel. It currently runs Community Connections, a show hosted by Mayor Adam Schneider, a bulletin board of events, footage from the city's summer concert series, and a few other programs.

Michele Bobrow suggested broadcasting events from the city's library, health programs and civic organizations as well.

"Those are excellent suggestions," Swanson said.

Several members of the audience said they wanted more political voices on the channel.

"Adam Schneider is on this cable program all the time and everyone who tunes in sees him," said city resident Bill Nordahl.

Councilman Brian Unger also said he wanted a chance to do an interview show.

Marlin said they tried to stay

away from controversial topics.

"I don't really see the show that is called Community Connections as a political endeavor," he said. It interviews people of interest to the city, from local athletes to the Red Cross. During election seasons, who can get air time is also controlled.

Another limiting factor is the Commission's budget, only \$12,000 a year. Most of this is spent on maintaining and upgrading equipment and a single part-time salary.

Part of the reason they can do this is because Monmouth University has agreed to house their equipment, and let them use the University's studios "on a limited basis, based on, obviously, their time table," said Marlin.

"If we had to go somewhere else, that \$12,000 wouldn't go very far."

Clifton said decisions on what to air on channel 20 are not made by Comcast.

Sea Bright Council briefs

By Jack Kearns

Sea Bright — The newly established School Formula Advisory Committee, chaired by Borough Council President Dina Long, is establishing some basic goals to be accomplished, and strategies to achieve what is achievable in the short term first, with longer term for future planning.

"We as a committee need to deal with what can reasonably be accomplished and then move past that," Long said at Tuesday's council meeting.

Due to the state's funding formula, Sea Bright pays five or six times more per pupil than do the other towns sending students to Shore Regional.

Starting at the new time of 7:30 p.m., the Borough Council's agenda was fairly light.



Sea Bright Council President Dina Long chairs the School Formula Advisory Committee.

Newest Councilmember Susana Markson said she is settling in.

"There is a lot to learn. The other members have been very helpful in that regard. It has been a good experience for me," she said.

Before the meeting Mayor Maria Fernandes said she is hoping for considerable dialogue with the residents on matters of concern. "The reason for changing meeting times for this year was specifically to make meeting attendance easier for our constituents" she said.

Plans for the new skateboard park are awaiting final location and costs estimates — the county will pay up to \$153,000, roughly half the expected total.

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