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Long Branch prepares for cable contract talks

By CAROL GORGA WILLIAMS, COASTAL MONMOUTH BUREAU

Members of the City's Cable Commission told the approximate audience of three people - one of whom included Councilwoman Mary Jane Celli - that residents can do much with the existing public access Channel 20.

Residents can submit their own video tapes of public meetings and community events, and they will be run, if they meet certain standards for quality. Meanwhile, residents are being urged to contact the cable commission with news of public events so it can be included on the newly enhanced bulletin board.

The statements were made during a public hearing convened in preparing for the city's re-negotiation with cable provider Comcast, which is seeking a non-exclusive right to the city's poles and rights of ways to install cable service.

Commission Co-Chairman Kevin Cieri blamed the low attendance on the bad weather, which, coincidentally, also marred a public hearing the commission convened in January 2008.

City officials are worried about what additional concessions they can secure from Comcast because they know Comcast's market share is being eroded by Verizon's FIOS. Right now, about 9,300 households in the city take Comcast services.

The city's contract with Comcast expires later this year. During the 1994 negotiation process, Comcast provided \$60,000, which the cable commission used to provide programming on Channel 20, officials said.

But they want to do more.

There also is room on that channel for educational programming from Long Branch schools, which wants its own channel, under the terms of the negotiations, which is a request the commission supports. But in the meantime, said Vice Chairman Howard Marlin, Channel 20 could easily accommodate an hour a week of programming from the schools.

Celli said the council will earnestly study a proposal to divert \$100,000 in cable franchise fees toward paying for the public broadcast of municipal meetings but this is not a year to take money away from the general fund where it is used to offset municipal purposes tax increases.

"Right now we have budget constraints," said Celli, adding she had often urged the commission to seek more than the \$12,000 a year in funding it has received over the last several years.

Diana Multare, a city resident who supports the public broadcast of meetings, even if the \$100,000 in cable fees is used for that purpose, suggested perhaps Monmouth University students would perform the duties through the terms of an internship. She then supported the suggestion the tasks could be performed by high school students when MU Professor Don R. Swanson, a commission co-chairman, informed her that his students are serving internships at major broadcast outlets in New York City and would not likely line up to

work at a municipal meeting in Long Branch, especially for no or little pay.

Swanson said the city is hardly unique in wanting its franchise fees to go to other purposes. He pointed out that adjacent communities also recoup money through cable franchise fees and none have used them to develop a public-access station or to broadcast public meetings.

For those who would like more information on the work of the cable commission or the materials the commission is preparing for the negotiations, visit the commission web site at <http://lbctv20.angelfire.com>. To email information to the commission about upcoming public events, use this address: lbctv20@aol.com.

The City Council will convene a special meeting to discuss the cable contract at 6:30 March 18.