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Some hope Long Branch council meetings will be televised

By CAROL GORGA WILLIAMS, COASTAL MONMOUTH BUREAU

The local Cable Commission is convening a public meeting tonight in preparation for renegotiating the city's contract with cable provider Comcast.

The meeting begins at 7 p.m. in council chambers in City Hall. The Comcast contract expires in September and at least 45 days before that, the City Council will have to hold its own public hearing about the provider.

Council President Michael DeStefano said at Tuesday's caucus meeting he was considering setting that session for sometime in March.

Public hearings on the cable service usually are pro forma but in the last year or so, the issue has become a political one, with Councilman Brian Unger lobbying that City Council meetings be televised. Other officials have expressed concern that the presence of such equipment would bring not light but heat to the process, especially when council meetings overwhelmingly attract those with complaints about city policy and procedures.

Unger also has expressed an interest in hosting his own television show. He has filled in as host for the show Mayor Adam Schneider does that is broadcast on Channel 20.

The mayor also has expressed concerns about who would pay for outfitting City Hall with the equipment, and who would operate the equipment and edit the material for broadcast. Right now, the cable company broadcasts only one show, in which the mayor hosts various newsmakers. It is put together at Monmouth University through the generosity of the broadcast school.

Residents Harold and Michelle Bobrow, both long-time advocates of televising the meetings, said the city recoups about \$100,000 a year from cable franchise fees and recommended those be earmarked for the broadcast costs. Right now, that money goes into the general fund to offset municipal taxes. DeStefano said he would not permit them to be diverted.

Cable Commission members Howard Marlin and Kevin Cieri briefed the council Tuesday on its hopes for negotiations. The Long Branch School system, which has its own television studio but no way to broadcast, has expressed a desire for an educational channel, a move endorsed by the commission.

The commission, which also operates an enhanced bulletin board service publicizing local events, wants to broadcast more library and health-related programming out of Monmouth Medical Center, Cieri said.

The existing cable contract was last negotiated in 1994, before the advent of competing services such as Verizon's FIOS, officials said. Members of the city's administration will act as the negotiation team while the cable commission will act in an advisory manner, said Cieri. Cable Commission member Robin Kampf formerly worked for a cable company negotiating such agreements, so officials hope her experience will help.