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Council Poised to Lock City into Bad 12-year Cable Deal

Proposed Comcast contract provides no operational funds for community television

BALTIMORE – Monday, December 6, 2004, at 5 PM the City Council is scheduled to take its final vote on the Comcast cable contract, bill 04-1504. Many insiders have said it is a done deal. Community television and free speech advocates are trying to delay the vote so critical shortcomings can be addressed.

Friday, Baltimore Grassroots Media (BGM) received, for the first time, the text of a side agreement between the city and Comcast for a \$570,000 training grant, the source of promised public access operating funds. However, the agreement letter does not indicate that the \$570,000 will go to public access, only that it will go to the City, where it could be used for the Mayor's Government channel 21 that already has a \$1.7 million annual budget. Currently the public's channel 5 has a zero budget. The letter is pre-dated December 6, 2004 and is not signed.

What the letter does clearly spell out is that the \$570,000 is in return for the city turning over four cable access channels to Comcast and putting strict limitations on the activation of the remaining four available channels. Why the loss of the four channels is even mentioned in the letter begs explanation, since this is already part of the proposed contract. Ken Crooks of Comcast has said his company wants to avoid setting a precedent where they are seen as giving too much to community television. But what BGM has heard from experts around the country is that Baltimore is about to set a precedent by agreeing to one of the worst deals for public access anywhere.

When the city of San José, California tried to get more cable access channels, Comcast refused arguing, "each channel is worth approximately \$21.6 million over a ten-year franchise term." Adjusted for Baltimore City, the value of the four lost channels over the 12-year contract is \$77 million, or 135 times \$570,000.

Friday night, BGM held a public forum on the public access situation in Baltimore. In attendance were several experts on public access from around the country who are sending a letter to City Council President Sheila Dixon to urge her to delay the vote on Monday. They are Richard Turner, Executive Director of Montgomery Community Television, Anthony Riddle, former Executive Director of public access facilities in Atlanta, Minneapolis and New York City, and former National Chair for the Alliance for Community Media, and Steve Ranieri, Executive Director of Community Cable Channel 27 TV in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Turner also raised the important point that the 50-cent pass-through, that the proposed contract stipulates can only be used for capital expenses, need not have been limited to capital expenses. In fact it could have been designated for operating funds. There is currently no provision for operating funds for public access in the contract. Without operating funds public access cannot hire any people to run public access.

Also in attendance was Tom Kiefaber, owner of the Senator Theatre, who offered to put a message up on the marquee of the theater and send a mass email out to 10,000 supporters. The marquee reads "STOP THE COMCAST CABLE CONTRACT! BILL 04-1504 NEEDS PUBLIC SCRUTINY CONTACT YOUR CITY COUNCIL PERSON."

The missing memorandum of understanding (MOU) Council President Dixon and Councilman Curran delayed the previous vote over has still not been issued by the Mayor's finance department. It is supposed to guarantee that \$430,000 would be directed from the city to public access.

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