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Baltimore Grassroots Media Calls for New Cable Contract to Guarantee Funding for Public Access TV and for More Time for Public Input

BALTIMORE, MD -- As the City conducts its first, and possibly only, public hearing tonight at 6:30 PM at 200 E. North Ave., on the re-negotiation of the 20-year-old agreement that allows Comcast Corporation to provide cable services, Baltimore Grassroots Media is demanding more time for assessment and public input in the process to get a better deal than last time.

The current contract, which expires December 4, 2004, did not provide adequate, continuing funding for public access, and the organization selected to run the public access channel, Baltimore Cable Access Corporation, eventually went under. The day-to-day operations of the station are now run by the Mayor's Office of Cable and Communications (MOCC) on an interim basis until a new cable franchise agreement is finalized and a new public access operator can be selected.

Baltimore Grassroots Media calls for a specific portion of the 5% of revenues that Comcast must pay to the City to be designated for public access TV. Currently this "cable franchise fee" goes to the City's general fund. In addition, they want new funding from the cable company to be designated for equipment and facilities as is provided in cities with vibrant public access programs.

For example, Ann Arbor, Michigan, with only 35,000 subscribers, has a \$1.2 million annual budget, which is divided equally among public, education, and government channels (PEG). This is funded entirely by the 5% cable franchise fee. In Grand Rapids, Michigan (198,000 pop), 40% of the franchise fee goes to the public access portion of PEG. In Massachusetts, state law ensures that cities direct all cable franchising fees to PEG.

At a recent panel discussion Marilyn Harris-Davis, director of the MOCC, said the City's goal is to have a new contract by April 30. However, Bunnie Riedel, director of the Alliance for Community Media, maintained it was unusual for the process to be so rushed. She held out hope, though, that the process could still be done fairly and said, "If everyone were sitting at the table in October with a contract that would be signed in December you would be fine."

"If I were going to take on Baltimore as a client I would expect to spend a good year working on assessment and ascertainment." Riedel would use the time to audit the cable company's financial, technical performance and customer service records and conduct community meetings to come up with criteria for the new contract that would make greater demands on the cable company.

According to Riedel, "The cable operators make 40-50% net profit and the net is going up." Marion Ware, director of Carroll Community Television, points out, "[Politicians] seem always to be so concerned about the cable companies... and it's ridiculous. Nobody makes that kind of profit."

Amanda Bowers of Baltimore Grassroots Media says, "We have an opportunity to create a truly democratic, local television outlet, but for this to happen the public must make its voices heard before it is too late."

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