

BACKGROUND

Community TV in Wisconsin serves a vital public information role on the local level, making local government transparent and providing a way for officials to talk directly to their residents in good times and during emergencies. Community TV also promotes involvement in and builds support for local schools, businesses, non-profit organizations, community activities, and the arts. Community TV creates quality professional jobs in our towns and provides job-training opportunities for high school and college students interested in careers in media. Many children and adults are also trained at Community TV centers and enjoy producing television programs.

Local governments choose to invest in Community TV for all these reasons and because residents have come to rely on it. However, that financial investment is at risk because cable companies and other video providers are failing to keep community television channels up-to-date technologically.

PROPOSED LEGISLATION PROVISIONS

1. The bill would require video providers to include Community TV program listings in the Electronic Program Guide (EPG). Subscribers routinely use the EPG to find and select TV shows to view in real time and to record for viewing at a later time. However, only a small minority of Community TV channels are listed on the EPG, making it difficult for subscribers to find, view, and record local programs of interest.

If the EPG system used by the video provider (such as Gracenote) is compatible with the scheduling system used by the Community TV center and a local government requests it, video providers would be required to list the program schedules of Community TV channels in the Electronic Program Guide.

2. The bill would require video providers to upgrade Community TV channels to HD so they can be viewed with the same quality reception as other channels on the lineup. In practice, carriage in the outdated SD format means that cable customers are seeing fuzzy-looking video on the Community TV channels. In Wisconsin, two small video providers, Solarus and Tri-County Cooperative transmit Community TV in HD, but two large video providers, Spectrum (formerly Charter), and Comcast do not.

3. The bill would give local governments the option to assess a 0.25% fee on the video portion of cable bills to raise funds for Community TV capital expenses. While the amount of the fee in this legislation would only add a few cents to each subscriber's monthly bill, the funds it would raise would improve the service provided to subscribers significantly. Video providers would be able to list the "Community TV Fee" as a line item on bills.

While this kind of fee (called a PEG fee) is allowed by federal law and is commonly assessed throughout the country, Wisconsin cities have not been able to collect it since 2011 due to 2007 Act 42. This law abrogated local franchise agreements and made state law the "franchise" video providers are governed by.

SUMMARY

These updates would markedly improve the Community TV service cable subscribers receive by improving reception, making programs easier to find, and enabling subscribers to record shows of interest. The Community TV Fee of a few cents each month would improve the amount and quality of local programming subscribers would receive. These changes would also boost the value of Community TV to local governments by making these channels much more likely to be used and viewed by residents.