

WISCONSIN COMMUNITY



www.wisconsincommunitymedia.com

Supporting community expression through media since 1998

January 23, 2015

VIA EMAIL

The Honorable Fred Upton
2183 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Greg Walden
2185 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Regulation of the Market for Video Content and Distribution - Response to the House Energy & Commerce Committee White Paper #6

Dear Representatives Upton and Walden,

Thank you very much for providing this opportunity to talk about how communications policy can continue to serve the public interest in a changing media marketplace.

Wisconsin Community Media is a professional organization serving 47 public, education, and government media access centers in Wisconsin. Our members range from the Town of Sevastopol, a small community in Door County that operates with barely any budget at all, to the City of Milwaukee with a staff of five, to the non-profit Chippewa Valley Community Television in Eau Claire.

Our media access centers exist today because of provisions in federal law that require cable systems to set aside access channels and collect fees from subscribers to pay for local programming (PEG fees) and for using city rights-of-way (franchise fees) *if* local communities request these things. Today, virtually every community in Wisconsin has an access channel and collects a franchise fee for the use of rights-of-way.

Brick and mortar media access centers embedded in our communities:

- Bring people together from diverse backgrounds to create programs that appeal to a variety of social, political, and religious local communities.
- Provide open access to local and state government through professional coverage of meetings, candidate forums, and issues discussions.
- Provide coverage of community events and activities that are not televised by commercial broadcasters or individual video creators.

- Produce quality videos for local businesses and non-profit organizations that would otherwise not hire the expertise needed to effectively use this highly popular medium.
- Train residents to produce video and use social media to promote their programming. These free and low-cost training opportunities are available to all members of the public, including kids and seniors.

Cable television systems are the source of funding for the equipment and staff needed to produce locally-oriented programs that are “pushed” out to broad community audiences on cable. Some of these programs may also be distributed on the Internet, a very different type of platform, where users search for specific content and tend to prefer short videos. Programs may also appear on one of the other video platforms mentioned in your white paper, such as HuluPlus.

Future telecommunication policy should ensure that funding is set aside to produce local public interest programming for distribution on all video platforms. “Public access” should not be the responsibility of only one type of video provider and funding should not be derived from only one type of video platform. All video platforms should contribute to a fund and provide space as possible to public interest programming.

In the short term, Wisconsin Community Media asks the House Energy & Commerce Committee to support legislation that would strengthen PEG access on multi-channel video systems. In particular, local programming would be strengthened by requiring systems to:

1. *Assess a PEG fee if a local community wants it.* Wisconsin municipalities may not assess a PEG fee due to a state law passed in 2007 that made state government the “local franchising authority.” At the time, PEG fees in Wisconsin averaged 25 cents per subscriber per month but several public access facilities negotiated higher fees, closer to \$1, to fund operating costs. These centers either closed or were substantially diminished by the loss of PEG fees. Those that relied on PEG fees for capital equipment have never found alternate sources of funding.
2. *Include PEG program listings on the Electronic Program Guide.* Besides informing viewers about what’s on PEG channels, the EPG enables viewers to use time-shifting technology like DVRs. Only a handful of access channels in Wisconsin are listed on the Electronic Program Guide.
3. *Carry PEG programming on channel numbers closer to the location of broadcast channels.* In Charter communities, access channels are carried in the 980s and 990s where few viewers venture. AT&T systems don’t really carry the access channels on the line-up at all. Viewers must navigate through a series of web pages to get to and reverse out of viewing access channels.
4. *Assess funding for PEG fees and franchise fees on all wireline services both “cable” and information services (broadband Internet).* Both services carry video on the same line running through city rights-of-way.
5. *Support media centers that invest in HD equipment by providing them with the bandwidth needed to cablecast in HD.* WCM would like to see Charter, Time Warner, and AT&T follow the lead of Solarus, a company providing cable services in Wisconsin Rapids.

Media access centers provide an important public service by producing quality videos about local people, government, businesses, issues, and events and training residents to do the same. From a marketplace standpoint, these programs may never make money for the media businesses that carry them, but they are important to “community conversation.” Media access centers occupy a niche that serves the public far beyond the cable systems that support them.

Wisconsin Community Media believes the role of federal communications policy should be to ensure that these brick and mortar local media centers thrive and feed the many alternative distribution systems now available with public interest programming.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mary Cardona". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored background.

Mary Cardona
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cc: Wisconsin Congressional delegation
Alliance for Community Media
American Community Television
National Association of Telecommunications Officers and Advisors
League of Wisconsin Municipalities