

REPORT OF THE CABLE ACCESS / CONTRACT RENEWAL COMMITTEE

The Cable Committee (CC) was organized in July, 2007, and began work in August. The terms of reference for its work were established by the Board of Selectmen (BoS). A division of opinion sometimes arose between the BoS and the CC as to where the Committee should place its emphasis – on contract negotiation or public access. This proved to be a good source of dynamic tension. It led to improvements in both the contract with Comcast and public access even before the contract was completed.

With respect to public access, the CC asked the BoS to relax the unusually restrictive rules for broadcasts of Fremont meetings and activities on local channel 22. The Board obliged by passing a rule that allowed much broader scope of broadcasts after a nearly identical motion had been passed by the CC. Prior to the change, the only local happenings seen regularly on Chapter 22 were BoS meetings. These broadcasts owed to the dedicated volunteer efforts of Keith Stanton, who devoted considerable time, effort and personal expense to tape BoS meetings for rebroadcast by Comcast from Exeter. With the change, people began to see more on Channel 22 – not only reflecting a broader set of Town meetings and activities but a Town bulletin board as well.

With respect to contract negotiations, a number of issues arose that were resolved in due course; specifically:

1. What kind of public broadcast offerings do Fremont households want, and how much would they be willing to pay for them via any “franchise fees” added to their Comcast cable bills?
2. What does the experience of neighboring towns with public access cable TV have to teach Fremont?
3. The need to extend public access cable TV service to certain streets in Fremont, including Midnight Sun and Old Ridge Road, that were out of the range of ready connectivity with the Comcast system. Houses on some of these ended up with cable service extended from Raymond or Sandown.
4. Whether the Town wanted to be able to have live broadcasts from Town Hall or other locations and, if so, how many locations?
5. What should be the length of a new contract with Comcast [the contract now ending is 20 years old]?
6. The cost of a fiber optic or coaxial cable to carry Fremont’s public access TV programming from Fremont to Exeter, and how this cost is to be borne.
7. The cost of equipment to handle the broader-scope programming noted earlier, and how this cost may be borne.

Issue #1 was addressed via a new survey of Fremont citizens, followed by a public hearing. The survey questionnaire was included as an insert in the Town Newsletter as well as being made available at Town Hall. The response rate was a respectable 4%. The results supplemented those from an earlier, telephone survey administered by Comcast. The survey and responses to it can be found via the Committee’s page on the Town website. Results reveal that most respondents were willing to pay more for more and

better programs. The survey also uncovered a good number of new volunteers to help produce programs featuring local people and activities.

Issue #2 was parceled out among Committee members. Each looked into a neighboring town's public access TV program. In sum, we discovered that most neighboring towns have more ambitious and varied programming than Fremont and that their programming is advertised in local newspapers. Cable TV subscribers were also paying far more for such programming than Fremont subscribers for Channel 22 access.

Issue #3 was not resolved until the end of the process even though Comcast presented an estimate of costs of extending its network to the problem streets at an early meeting. It was not clear to the Committee whether streets' residents wanted Channel 22 connectivity, but Comcast was required to enable it. Only one person from Old Ridge Road, for example, appeared to express their interest at a CC meeting. Old Ridge Road has never been wired by Comcast even though it was part of the company's "service area" as defined in Appendix A of the 1988 contract. The Midnight Sun Drive area was similarly defined in Appendix A but became connected to the cable service area of another town.

The answer to question #4 was a resounding "yes" and two other "drops" in addition to Town Hall were specified for broadcast origination: the Ellis School and the Library. The answer to #5 is 10 years length of contract, established by a vote of the Committee on October 16, 2007.

Issue #6 earned a great deal of discussion over several meetings. Comcast's estimated cost was about \$26,400, to be paid out over the 10-year span of the contract. Most of the discussion was whether this would be a "not to exceed" cost and whether the Town would be held harmless from cost increases. Comcast was averse to specifying the figure in the body of a new contract. The Committee decided that specifications of the cost limit and allowable time for building the line could be handled via a legally binding side letter from Comcast to the Town. Member Keith Stanton, acting as a private citizen, proposed four ways that the Town could save money in order to finance the line.

Issue #7 also occupied a good deal of attention because:

- (1) Video equipment delivered to the Town by Comcast's predecessor, Continental Cablevision, under the 20-year contract ending on Feb. 21, 2008, was subsequently thrown out in the trash.
- (2) The Committee throughout was very cost-conscious, especially given the defeat of a warrant article at last year's Town Meeting to reserve only \$400 for public TV access.
- (3) The biannual payout of franchise fee collections by Comcast to the Town's Fund, given the 1/2% rate agreed to by the Committee, would not be sufficient to purchase equipment to implement the program in the first year, so the issue arose -- from where might equipment financing arise?

- (4) As part of a package deal late in contract negotiations, Comcast suggested that it could provide at no cost the tape player now used in Exeter. The Committee demanded that it be gifted to the program whether or not there was any “quid pro quo” in the contract. Comcast agreed.
- (5) The representative from Sandown who met with our Committee more than once suggested that some other used equipment might be available from Sandown and neighboring towns.

Comcast made it clear that the company is getting out of the tape-playing or other aspects of the public access TV broadcasting “business.” Upon contract execution, the Town of Fremont would assume responsibility for Channel 22. Triggers are included in the contract to open one or two additional channels as demand for public access TV programming grows. The growth potential was indicated by responses to our survey. Thus, because of the Cable Committee’s work, public access cable television – and the improvements in information about our community thereby provided -- has a hopeful future in the Town of Fremont.

Respectfully submitted,

Brande McLean, Chair
Peter Bearse, Co-Chair

Other members of the Committee include: Neal Janvrin, Tom McGall, Larry Morse, Keith Stanton, and Warren Yee.

This report is dedicated to Brande McLean, the first Chair of the CC, who long advocated better public information on Fremont local government so that voters would be better informed and more might be inspired to participate in local public affairs.