



**Portsmouth
Cable Commission Meeting
3:00 p.m. – January 5, 2006
City Hall/City Manager’s Conference Room**

The Portsmouth Cable Commission met on Thursday, January 5, 2006 at 3:00 p.m.

1. Call to Order

The following were present:

John Gregg, Chairman
John Bohenko, City Manager
Louis Vinciguerra, Commissioner
Kathleen Pearce, Commissioner
Jeffrey Landry, Commissioner

Also present were Alan Brady, City of Portsmouth Webmaster and Suzanne Woodland, Assistant City Attorney.

Chairman John Gregg called the meeting to order at approximately 4:00 p.m.

2. Approval of Minutes

Voted to approve and accept the minutes of the December 1, 2005 Cable Commission meeting.

3. Learnings from December Field Trip to Bedford and Manchester

John Gregg referred to the previously distributed notes from the field trip and suggested discuss key observations and conclusions that were arrived at based on the information gathered from the field trip.

Public Access

Louis Vinciguerra thought both Bedford and Manchester were enthusiastic of the City Government issues and but that he wasn’t as enthused about the public access channel. He felt that if we ask for anything from the Cable Company it should go to the schools to build up that system and then if we want public access use whatever time is left over.

Commission members generally expressed interest in supporting the needs of the school system.

Jeff Landry stated he hasn't heard of much enthusiasm for public access and that we should not be raising taxes to get it.

Channels and Studios

John Bohenko referenced the need to have additional studio capability as well as additional channels. He envisions that the equipment at City Hall will stay at City Hall since it is used to produce the Government channel programs which have become very popular. John Gregg stated that this very question was asked in Manchester and the answer of what was popular were the Board meetings, City Council, etc. They were very enthusiastic about public access programs, but what the community watches is by and large what we have with our Government channel.

City Manager stated there are ways of sharing a studio at the high school with public access e.g. separate entryways. He also referenced his experience in another City where several towns participated in a common public access channel and suggested the Committee think about talking with our surrounding communities: Rye, New Castle, Newington and Greenland. Sometime in the future, John Gregg as Chair of the Commission, might send a letter to the Chairman and/or Board of Selectmen in each community and invite them to a meeting to discuss the concept. City Manager stated we need to find out what type of franchise agreements New Castle, Rye, Greenland and Newington have presently have with Comcast before we meet with them.

Kathleen Pearce's concern with putting things in the high school is access and would not want to see it become something tied down to certain hours.

Chairman Gregg stressed the importance of learning more about what the Schools want for our next ascertainment hearing.

A discussion about whether / how to permit programs not produced by local residents resulted in agreement that a specific policy would need to be put in place. Suzanne stated there would have to be a structure to differentiate content. Chairman Gregg informed the Committee that in Bedford, any program not produced by a resident, whether in their studio or otherwise, had to have 25 resident signatures in order to go on the air. There was general agreement this seemed reasonable.

With regard to developing programming experience, Kathy Pearce pointed out that an idea that came up in discussions with Bedford and Manchester was to begin by dedicating a certain portion weekends airtime to public access and mid-afternoon, when kids are out of school, to educational programs. This could serve as a first step, but we would still need money for equipment, a supervisor to make sure it all works. Some Commission members felt we should have a specific channel for public access and not mix it up.

Kathy Pearce said that if we chose to do something among different town, it would have to be a non-profit.

Louis Vinciguerra referred to the 2003 survey conducted by Comcast and data suggesting the public is not in favor of public access if where to cost them \$1 / month. He pointed out the need to educate people about public access before presuming to obtain a valid opinion. Chairman Gregg referred also to the importance of the wording of the survey saying that it can dramatically alter the results.

Managing Costs

Chairman Gregg can foresee a scenario where the City essentially contributed small part of the \$300,000 annual franchise fee in support of education and public access. Partnering cities would then also contribute some amount, and over the long term, a non-profit entity would raise money to fill the gap.

City Manager suggested setting up a challenge where the City participates by 50% of the cost and get the other 50% by groups. For example if it will cost \$200,000 to set up a studio at the high school, \$100,00 through Franchise fee and \$100,000 from donations. This would be similar to the way the city has cooperated with neighborhood groups to build and refurbish parks. It has worked well in some instances.

4. Surveying Portsmouth Residents and Future Ascertainment Hearings

Chairman Gregg raised the point of how to collect further information through ascertainment hearings and the possibility of doing a survey of the public. He indicated he would like to know more about the public's view of Comcast's performance as well as their interest in receiving public access and more educational programming.

Suzanne Woodland informed the committee that Comcast has informed us they anticipate doing another ascertainment survey in August similar to the one done in 2003. They would then be ready to issue a more formal proposal to the city in January 2007. There was some discussion about the possibility of the Commission achieving its objectives through the Comcast survey, but it was felt that this was not likely.

Ways of doing our own survey were discussed. City Manager stated that the city puts out an electronic newsletter and suggested we could put in an article that says "if you would like to comment on performance by Comcast, please click to the survey" and then put answers in future weekly reports. It was also suggested that a survey could be appended to the city website but would need a mechanism to avoid multiple responses.

Suzanne Woodland reminded the Commission that Comcast will survey rather extensively regarding public perceptions of quality i.e. the Commission would want to avoid duplication.

Chairman Gregg pointed out the desirability of obtaining reliable data about public interest in additional programs regarding public access and educational access. He referenced the value this would have in helping the City Council assess any recommendations the Commission might make – especially at they relate to costs.

Chairman Gregg asked the Committee their reaction in doing our own survey to learn more about interest in public access and asked the City Manager if some money could be available to support doing so. Answer: it would depend on how much.

City Manager suggested talking to UNH, who have been helpful in the past. Chairman Gregg stated he would be happy to work on this with Alan Brady and come back with a plan.

MOTION made by Jeff Landry for Chairman Gregg and Alan Brady to look into this and come back with a plan or ideas at the next meeting. Seconded by Louis Vinciguerra. Motion passed.

Chairman Gregg then raised the question of who should be invited to future ascertainment hearings and asked Alan Brady when we could hold them. It was agreed we should invite the Portsmouth City Schools, city departments to provide their thoughts at an early date. Alan Brady will look for some dates for the end of March, early April.

City Manager suggested the idea of reaching out the School Board by asking for an opportunity to address the School Board and explaining the Commission’s hopes with regard to the ascertainment hearing.

5. Other

Chairman Gregg asked Suzanne Woodland, as best she could tell us, where are we in being prepared for working with outside counsel. Her response is they are still finalizing the agreement. Chairman Gregg said it would be helpful to know what the key steps and timeline will be for the negotiating process and asked Suzanne if she would put this together for the Commission.

Chairman Gregg stated that from time to time the city receives complaints from residents about Comcast and thought it would be good to make copies and distribute with monthly mailings to the members. It was agreed to do so.

VI. Adjournment: MOTION to adjourn made by Louis Vinciguerra. Seconded by Jeff Landry.

Respectfully submitted,

Elaine E. Boucas

