Cable Franchise Renewal Discussion Points: Proposal for Institutional Network (I-NET)

"A hundred years ago, lack of a railroad stop condemned many towns to a lingering death. Thirty years ago, interstate interchanges helped many communities to prosper, while those on back roads stagnated. Now the 'information superhighway' is coming. Will your town be ready?"
--Miles R. Fidelman, President, Center for Civic Networking

New advanced telecommunications networks will soon be as fundamental a part of the core infrastructure of cities as streets and telephones are today. Over the next several years, cities not linked to the "information superhighway" are likely to suffer the same fate as cities in other eras that did not have a railroad stop or highway interchange. The "information superhighway" already exists. What doesn't exist are the "electronic city streets" - the community network - that will provide universal digital services equivalent to universal telephone service.[i]

The statements above are the beginning of a flyer that was distributed to the public as a part of a process used in Tucson, Arizona to develop a telecommunications policy. Tucson identified a need to "coordinate community resources, capabilities and technologies supportive of advanced telecommunications policy development." Building the Pittsburgh Cable System should be a part of a larger telecommunications policy based on community vision. Given the timing for the franchise renewal, an overall City policy may not be available as a guide. The following goals are based on the City of Boston's franchise renewal process with Cablevision.

General Cable Franchise Renewal Goals[ii]

The City's goals for a cable television franchise with TCI should include:

1. Good quality, affordable, residential services including cable-cast reception, line repair, line extension policies, and reasonable basic tier programming rates and equipment fees;
2. Public, Educational and Government (PEG) Access support in order to provide valued programming through the Public, Educational & Government Access channels.
3. Expeditious build-out of the cable system throughout Pittsburgh's 88 neighborhoods; and,
4. Technology for the future. The City should invite TCI to outline plans for building a cable system to meet the future needs of the residents and businesses of the City who have expressed a strong interest in data transmission, interactive services, telephony and video on a broadband network and other new broadband services.

The new cable franchise should include an Institutional Network

One area of the current franchise renewal process is the need to identify the future community needs related to the Pittsburgh Cable system. As a part of defining community needs the City should define what type of Institutional Network should be developed that will meet Pittsburgh's needs for the next decade. The Institutional Network can consist of **video, data and voice facilities that link schools, libraries, and government buildings so that these institutions can communicate more efficiently with themselves and with the public**.

The Cable Franchise with Warner Cable included the development of a "C" cable which may still exist and link City buildings in downtown Pittsburgh. What is the current status of this "C" cable and has it been used? The current franchise with TCI mentions as "additional considerations" that TCI must provide "Service to Public Buildings" and a return path feed line from the City County building. The agreement also mentions providing cables drops to schools and free basic service to these facilities.[iii] These additional considerations describe the basis for what was called the Institutional Network in the 1980's.

As we build the Pittsburgh Cable system for the year 2000 and beyond we must take full advantage of the potential of advanced telecommunications technology to serve the people of Pittsburgh.

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Proposal

The City should require TCI to provide for the construction of a discrete, two-way Institutional Network (I-Net) that links city facilities, schools, libraries and community centers for communication, educational and Internet services. The I-NET should utilize fiber optic cable to I-NET user locations. All available bandwidth on the I-NET would be allocated at the discretion of the City and could include cable video programming and Internet. At a minimum there should be provision for one I-NET distribution / drop point in each of Pittsburgh's 88 neighborhoods. All basic and expanded basic cable services and full Internet access should be provided over the I-NET without charge.

Discussion

From entertainment only to communication

A traditional cable system is thought of as an entertainment vehicle; in this context, information is sent downstream from the operator to the customer. However, the same system of cables, with minor modifications, is capable of providing an upstream path for information as well. All around the country cable providers are switching from coax cable to fiber optic cable. Fiber optic cable allows for the transmission of larger amounts of information.

One implication of this dual capability is to allow for an institutional network (or I-Net), where fiber / cable is run to allow full two-way exchange of information (data, audio and video). The information shared across an I-Net is not typically available to cable subscribers at their homes. However, the resources of the I-NET will be fully available to people at community sites. Each of Pittsburgh's 88 neighborhoods should have at least one community access site which includes computer / Internet labs, where residents and community groups can use computers, email and the Internet. These sites networked with the I-NET can also provide opportunities for greater public access to government and community information and greater opportunities for residents and community groups to present input to government agencies and representatives. Some additional uses of such an institutional network could include teleconferencing, educational programming, remote monitoring and meter reading (telemetry), training, interactive computer files and other high-speed data transmission applications. Such a systems can enable citizens to more easily obtain permits and pay bills; allow users to access library systems; make it possible to broadcast interactive educational programming from I-NET neighborhood sites; and provide the City with the ability to more efficiently manage public systems.

As a communication system, the I-NET allows for Pittsburgh residents to be producers as well as consumers of information. The current successful model for organizing production facilities and training community producers, **PCTV – Channel 21**, should be expanded to include new production possibilities provided by the I-NET (interactive and other high-speed community media) and perhaps to provide support for neighborhood sites.

All neighborhoods have access

It is important that the deployment of fiber optic cable and the I-NET is targeted to reach all of Pittsburgh's neighborhoods. We must prevent the tendency for fiber optic cable to be deployed only to more affluent communities by specifying an aggressive deadline for fiber optic connectivity to all 88 neighborhoods. This will require specific work on the part of TCI but will also require work within each of the neighborhoods to select a location and arrange support for public access to the Institutional Network. Where will the I-NET distribution point be located in each of the 88 neighborhoods? What organization(s) will host the public access site(s)?

This proposal is intended to help generate discussion about one aspect of our renewal process, which is defining what type of Institutional Network our city needs. Discussion is also necessary around defining what Public, Educational and Government (PEG) Access channels our community needs and what amount of support the operator (TCI) will be required to provide for PEG Access.

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[i] Tucson's Information Superhighway...Promise Through Participation, http://www.ci.tucson.az.us/pt-attachII.html, The City of Tucson, Arizona drafted this flyer summarizing local telecommunications policy issues in 1996, with the intention of distributing it broadly to the business community, educational institutions, nonprofit organizations and civic groups.

[ii] http://www.ci.boston.ma.us/technology/cable/PressRelease.html

[iii] Franchise Agreement between The City of Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh Telecommunications, Inc., October, 1984

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