

Public Hearing

May 3, 2006

The stated Public Hearing of the Board of Commissioners of Abington Township was held on Wednesday, May 3, 2006 at the Township Administration Building, Abington, PA, with Commissioner Carlin presiding.

CALL TO ORDER: 7:05 p.m.

ROLL CALL: Present: Commissioners WACHTER, AGOSTINE, SCHREIBER, JAY O'CONNOR, BENZAK, ZAPPONE, GILLESPIE, MYERS, LYNOTT, MICHAEL O'CONNOR, DIJOSEPH, CARLIN.
Absent: LUKER, WEILHEIMER, RING

Township Manager CONWAY
Assistant Township Manager LAHAZA

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Public Hearing – Comcast Franchise Renewal

Mr. Conway stated this hearing is for the purpose of gaining public input on the Comcast Franchise renewal. We are at the end of a 15-year franchise agreement with Comcast to provide cable service to our residents. The hearing has been advertised for several weeks in the local paper and it has been advertised on Channel 43 and on our website. The Township contracted with Cohen Telecommunications Law Group to lead us in this process, and he introduced Phil Fraga of Cohen Telecommunications Law Group

Mr. Fraga stated Comcast will give a brief presentation, and we will take public comments on past performance issues and present and future needs of the Township.

Stephanie Lowe, Director, Government and Community Relations – Comcast Cable of Montgomery County, introduced Ralph McClellan, Director of Franchise Affairs, who was present that evening. Comcast has a track record of meeting the technical, financial and legal qualifications to provide cable television service to the residents of Abington Township. We are serving more than 17,000 customers in Abington. Comcast Credo is the nations leading cable operator serving more than 22 million customers nationwide. Over the past seven or eight years, we have rolled out new innovative services such as: digital cable television, high speed internet service, digital video recorders, high definition television and soon we will launch Comcast Digital Voice, which is a phone service that is a voiceover internet protocol. In 1996, we upgraded our technical infrastructure to 750 megahertz, which gives us more bandwidth to be able to provide two-way interactive services. We upgraded our Customer Service Call Centers. We now have 24-hour, 7-day per week call centers to serve the residents of Abington Township.

We have a program called "Think Customer First," which is an internal metrics program that evaluates monthly surveys that our customers complete. In the 1st Quarter of 2006, we ranged between 71% and 92% in various categories. We have community investment programs such as scholarship programs and "Cable in the Classroom," which provides 540 hours of commercial-free programming to students in grades K-12. We provide free internet and free cable television service to schools and libraries, and our program, Comcast Cares Day, helps beautify local communities.

Mr. Conway commented we have copies of the franchise agreement for the Board and the public.

Commissioner Benzak asked why is PCN (Pennsylvania Cable Network) a potential problem for being part of the basic cable?

Ms. Lowe replied we cannot place it on our analog tier because we lack channel capacity to do so, although, PCN is on our digital tier service, Channel 185. She has internally pitched it so we could bring it to Abington Township and the Comcast of Willow Grove Cable System. She was recently informed that in other parts of Montgomery County, PCN will be launched on Channel 75 on the basic tier in June, 2006.

Commissioner Benzak asked is the PCN part of the negotiations?

Ms. Lowe replied no. We polled our residents and they want PCN on the basic tier.

Mr. Conway stated the seven community system is referred to as the Willow Grove System, which includes Cheltenham, Upper/Lower Moreland, Rockledge, Jenkintown and Bryn Athen.

Commissioner Jay O'Connor asked when PCN is added, what channel is removed?

Ms. Lowe replied we move one of the current channels from our basic tier to our digital tier.

Commissioner Jay O'Connor asked if the cable goes out, what are the staffing hours?

Ms. Lowe replied should if there is a service interruption of any kind; customers can call our call centers 24-hours, 7-days a week from 7:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m. including weekends.

Commissioner Gillespie asked why do we get NJN on the basic plan?

Ms. Lowe replied NJN is a popular channel, and it was negotiated as something we wanted to provide as part of the Philadelphia Market.

Commissioner DiJoseph asked why is QVC provided, but not HSN?

Ms. Lowe replied she does not know at this time.

Commissioner Jay O'Connor stated Abington has Channel 43. Do all communities have their own channel?

Ms. Lowe replied Public Educational and Governmental Access channels are not mandatory. She is responsible for 69 communities and about 10-12 of them have a public educational government access channel that operates. In a franchise agreement, channels may be reserved for future operation, but may not be currently programmed.

Commissioner Jay O'Connor asked if Abington chose not to broadcast Channel 43, would it be replaced with another channel.

Mr. McClellan replied yes.

Commissioner Jay O'Connor asked is there a cost to the consumer for that option?

Mr. McClellan replied no.

Public Comments:

Selma Dafilou, 868 Fernhill Road, stated she is a member of the League of Women Voters of Abington, Cheltenham and Jenkintown, and the purpose of the LWV is to promote political responsibility through informed and active citizen participation in government. We support the PEG channel for Comcast. She is concerned that citizen input be timely with this new contract. She introduced Irene McNeil, who lives in Lower Merion Township, who will provide more information on this topic.

Irene McNeil, 538 N. Wynnewood Avenue, Wynnewood, PA., stated she is representing herself and is a volunteer setting up the public channel in her township. She is also a member of the LWV, and they asked her to speak this evening. Everyone has to work together to get the best outcome, and Comcast is a very professional organization. There is a Bill in Washington that will create a national franchise agreement so local franchise agreements will become mute. She referred to a case in Narberth Borough where Comcast gave them a choice to have a PEG channel or \$50,000. That was the worth to Comcast to provide that service.

The National Cable Act mandates the cable operator to offer three channels. In her township, there is a government channel governed by the township, the educational channel is governed by the school district, but there is not a public channel. She became a member of the Alliance for Community Media that helps PEG channels renew their franchise agreements and supports all volunteers who work on the public access channel. We created a non-profit corporation with 10 members to work on our public access channel, and we work in collaboration with our township and Comcast.

Selma Dafilou invited the Board of Commissioners to a meeting on May 18th regarding Emergency Preparedness and Ed Momorella will be speaking. It would be a good event to televise.

Lora Lehmann, 1431 Bryant Lane, stated we have been asking for the Township meetings to be filmed and that should be part of this negotiation. Once the negotiations are closed the issue of cost may come up. The citizens would like an update on the negotiations and another chance for input.

Commissioner Gillespie asked how many households in Abington have cable television?

Ms. Lowe replied 69.4% - 70%.

Mr. Conway stated there are 22,000 dwelling units in Abington, 18,000 are single-family, which means about 4,000 apartment units. The 16,000 customers are mostly of the single-family homes.

Commissioner Benzak asked do we have a say in the channel lineup in the franchise agreement?

Mr. Fraga replied he does not want to get into what is in the current template of the agreement. The channel lineup is not in our control to mandate.

ADJOURNMENT: 7:46 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Burton T. Conway, Secretary

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