

October 1, 2005

Dear Mayor Lansing and Council Members,

Enclosed is a proposal for public access television in Northfield. I am excited to present this proposal for I believe it sets out an innovative plan to expand and revitalize community television.

I respectfully request a discussion of my proposal at a city council work session. I look forward to an opportunity to discuss this proposal with the council.

In May of this year, I spoke at a city council meeting and mentioned that without a new agreement, NTV had only enough funds to operate through Fall 2005. There have been no discussions of substance between the city and NTV regarding the future of access since the May meeting.

Our fund balance is now to the point where I must inform you that for October and November 2005, NTV will not be staffed during the day. We will maintain channel 16 and continue to receive and schedule programming (city council meetings, Rice County board, church services, etc.). If NTV does not receive any funding (temporary or permanent, based on a new agreement) NTV will cease operating public access channels 12 and 16 on Dec. 15, 2005. NTV will vacate its rental facilities by Dec. 31, 2005 and the city will need to move its share of television equipment from the NTV facilities by Dec. 31, 2005.

Just to be clear, I want to see public access continue in Northfield. I am an advocate for change. I want to increase opportunities for more people to participate in public access and my proposal is designed to achieve this goal. NTV (and I as president of NTV) want to be part of the new paradigm of public access in Northfield.

It is my desire for NTV and the city to work together to achieve not just a solution, but a vision for public access in Northfield.

Sincerely,

Paul Hager
President, NTV 26

The following issues are findings based on my twenty years of operating public access television in Northfield. It is essential that these issues be understood and addressed in any discussion regarding the future of Public Access television in Northfield.

1. Public Access no longer has the equipment advantage.

Twenty years ago, public access offered a unique opportunity: anyone could check-out a video camera, VCR recorder, microphone and make their own television show. A person could gain experience in using television production tools and the visual language of television. Twenty years ago, television production tools were very expensive and not readily available. Public Access offered its equipment on a quid pro quo basis: users agreed to create programming for the access channel in return for the experience gained in using the equipment.

With the revolution in digital technology, television production tools are inexpensive and everywhere. What once was rare is now commonplace. A video enthusiast no longer has to “make a deal” with Public Access to experience the challenge and rewards of video production.

2. Few people are willing to volunteer 20 hours to produce a one-shot 20 minute program.

Do we have a population base that is large enough to generate a significant number of volunteer public access producers? Our community is very generous with their volunteer time and dollars. Most volunteer opportunities require no special skills and the time involved is either short: (driving Meals on Wheels for a day or a week) or manageable (six hours a month at the Humane Society).

Volunteers who wish to create a television program have to be willing to make a substantial time commitment. Creating a television show requires many hours of planning, producing, and post-production. Production of an edited program can easily take one hour for every minute of the final program. That’s a lot of work for a program that may be timely when it is first cablecast, but out-of-date the next week.

An additional challenge to volunteer producers is a truth about television: Success in broadcasting is found by creating a series of programs that viewers can watch on a regular basis. The volunteer producer has a choice: make a one-shot program that disappears amid the stream of television programming, or spend more hours creating a series of programs in order to attract viewers and build an audience.

Volunteer “burn-out” often occurs as well. An access producer who volunteers to tape one event becomes the sole “producer” and is then asked to tape every forum, meeting, Christmas pageant, etc.

3. The City of Northfield, as the Franchise Authority, must affirm their support for public access television.

Northfield must decide if it wants to have a public access channel. Belief in the unique value of a city public access channel is critical in assuring its success.

Northfield is now faced with the end of NTV as it has functioned for the last 20 years unless it re-affirms its belief in the value of public access and positions it for the future.

IN SUMMARY,

- The primary attraction of public access television has been erased by changes in technology. It is time to re-think the model for public access.
- We should capitalize on the digital technology revolution that has created a visual storyteller in every household that has a video camcorder.
- We can and should provide a modest financial incentive to spur production of community programming.
- We must create a higher level of visibility for public access and invite local institutions to take an active role in creating programming.

In 20 years of operation, NTV has created more than two thousand programs that have aired on the public access channel. Local organizations, churches, and governments have created over a 1000 programs for access. I believe this is just a fraction of what could be produced in the Northfield community.

PAUL HAGER'S PROPOSAL

My proposal has three goals:

1. Exploit the digital technology revolution.
2. Establish a Cable Access Board to promote public access and offer funding for the creation of community television programming.
3. Expand the number and diversity of community television producers and programs.

Here is how I could help the City of Northfield realize these goals:

A. Funding

Designate a portion of the Cable Television Franchise Fee for the creation of a public access Television Development Fund (TDF). Funds generated from PEG fees (Public, Educational,

and Government) would also be added to the TDF. TDF funds would be used to seed development of public access television programming.

B. Structure

Create a Cable Access Board (CAB) comprised of citizens from the Northfield Cable TV service area. The purpose of the CAB would be to promote public access programming by offering seed money for the creation of a series of programs to be shown on the public access channel.

Funding proposals would only be accepted from local, non-profit organizations. Funds could only be spent on costs directly related to program production; funds could not be used to purchase video production equipment. The CAB would review programming proposals. The CAB would recommend TDF award recipients to the City Council. Applicants would only receive funding in two consecutive cycles. Applicants receiving funds would have reporting requirements to the CAB.

The CAB funding cycle could be limited to perhaps three cycles per year. The CAB would be staffed on a part-time basis with staff costs funded from cable franchise fees.

C. Public Access Channel Operations

The CAB would contract for the operation and programming of the public access channels. NTV is an experienced television programmer and is willing to perform this service. Keeping the programming function with NTV would maintain the freedom and independence of public access programming. NTV would be responsible for daily maintenance of equipment, technical quality of the cablecast signal sent to the cable head end, and maintaining a log of cablecast programming. NTV would continue to offer on-line access to channel 16, the text based information channel.

Frequently Asked Questions

How would this model of public access increase the number of public access users and programs ?

By establishing a fee-for-service model that acknowledges the work of access producers in creating programs, producers will seek out those opportunities where their efforts and experience will be rewarded. As this model is recognized and adopted in the community, organizations will begin to self-fund their productions. For example: a soccer association offers to pay a small stipend to a producer who is willing to videotape a "game of the week" that showcases each of the teams during the summer season. The tape is shown on "Soccer Showcase" a continuing program on the access channel. "Soccer Showcase" attracts an audience of soccer fans and builds the association's identity in the community. As a result of the increased exposure via television, there is an increase in the number of games being taped and a desire to "ramp-up" the production to include more interviews, graphics, and commentary. A local baseball association sees the success of "Soccer Showcase" and adopts the soccer association's model for programming and compensating producers. During the

winter, the “soccer producer” approaches the local hockey association and pitches the idea of a “Hockey Game of the Week”.

The model of fee-for-service spreads to any organization that has a desire to broaden its message to the community: the Community Action Center, the Senior Center, Community Education and Recreation, Rotary Club, League of Women Voters, Cannon River Watershed.

How would the CAB determine which programs get funded?

The CAB would establish its own criteria for programming. Certainly one consideration is cost of the production and the amount being requested of the CAB. The CAB could establish funding criteria that would provide partial or full funding for a request.

As for programming I suggest an emphasis on multi-part programs, and evergreen programs that can be re-played. These programs benefit the organization making the request and help build a library of public access programming. However, weekly coverage of the youth soccer program should be available for funding, too.

The CAB should have several members on its board who can adequately judge the technical components of a proposal and understand the feasibility of a project being completed.

Who actually produces the programming?

A non-profit organization may contract with an independent producer (Northfield has quite a few!) or may use the funds to offer a stipend for an employee or a volunteer who takes on the task of producing the program. Similarly, a Northfield producer might approach an organization with a programming proposal.

The intention would be that once an organization starts producing programming and recognizes the benefit of having a presence on the cable television system, the organization would begin to incorporate their programming costs into their operating budget and make requests to the CAB for exceptional circumstances.

What is the budget for grants and programming the channel?

The budget would be set by resolution of the City Council acting as the Franchise Authority. For example, NTV received \$ 75,000 in one year in the 1990's. That money could be divided as follows: \$ 20,000 for operations and programming the channel, \$ 40,000 for programming grants, and \$ 15,000 for staff and expenses for the CAB. Some years might see increases or reductions in funds available. The CAB could decide not to award all of its funds for the fiscal year and roll over those funds to the next year.

Where will the dollars come from to fund the TDF and the CAB ?

I am recommending the TDF and CAB be funded from a portion of the cable television franchise fee and from the Public, Educational, and Government (PEG) fee that is collected on the cable subscriber's monthly bill. The original intent of allowing municipalities to collect a franchise fee was to promote PEG and offset franchise related expenses. As NTV has not requested funds (due to the lack of a new agreement between NTV and the city) for the past three years, I would expect the cable television fund to have sufficient dollars to fund this proposal for a trial period of two years.