

Wilburn vows to resolve dispute over cablevision payment

BY JOSHUA KENNEDY
For the Evening News

BEDFORD TOWNSHIP — An advisory panel to the Bedford Township Board Tuesday night questioned the recent removal of several members and challenged the board publicly to set aside petty politics and pay \$60,000 to Bedford Public Schools.

Several board members in turn chastised the members of the Bedford Township Cablevision Advisory Committee for "airing dirty laundry in public" and "going to the press."

"I resent that committee going to the press," Trustee Paul Francis said. "They advise this board, not The (Toledo) Blade, The Monroe Evening News or the Bedford NOW. I've looked at their purpose statement and cannot find anywhere where they are supposed to advise the press."

"This shouldn't have happened this way."

The cablevision committee effectively has been disbanded, forbidden to meet and has seen several longtime members — including former chairman Steve Lennex — not reappointed since recommending that the township repay the schools three years worth of local origination payments at \$20,000 a year.

The squabble started about a month ago when the cablevision committee — a group of volunteers who oversee the township's contract with Buckeye Cable Co. — publicly announced that the township has been withholding annual payments due to the schools.

The franchise agreement with Buckeye includes language that the township will receive 4 percent of the cable company's local revenues. The same contract created a three-way partnership in which the cable company would pay the township and the township would pay the schools.

The contract was set up so that the schools would get \$20,000 — \$10,000 from the cable company and \$10,000 from the township — each year. The money would help fund the broadcasting program. That money was paid to the schools from 1999 to 2002.

"There is no language anywhere requiring students to tape meetings," Mr. Lennex said. "How you could somehow extract that is beyond me."

In August, 2002, the previous township board hired Triple "L" Productions of Lambertville to tape twice monthly township board meetings and air them on the local public access channel.

Several of those board members said they hired the outside broadcasting agency because the students missed taping more

than a year's worth of meetings. That seems to be the crux of the issue: whether the schools were obligated to provide services for the local origination funds they received through the cable contract.

Local origination funds — money generated by the fees the cable company charges residents — total about \$170,000 a year in Bedford Township. The cablevision committee says the township owes the school \$20,000 a year — \$10,000 from the cable company and \$10,000 from the township — for each year since 2002.

"Your predecessors were wrong," Mr. Lennex told the board Tuesday night. "And you, too, will be wrong if you don't see this opportunity to correct this. And it saddens me to say this, but a few of you are more wrong."

The matter was slated for discussion at Tuesday night's meeting, but never made it to the agenda. In the meantime Mr. Lennex, a member for 12 years, and Bernice Heidelberg a Whiteford Township representative, were not reappointed to the panel over the holiday weeks.

"I don't think they were removed," Mr. Francis said. "Their terms had expired."

"I said I would try and bring new blood into these committees," said Supervisor Walt Wilburn, who was home battling throat cancer when cablevision committee members called his home to argue about the missing payments.

"This is not Walt's — or the current administration's — problem," said Gene Stock, another cablevision member. "It's not anybody's fault. I'm not here to point fingers or decide blame. Let's do the right thing for Bedford Schools and our kids."

Several school board members and Supt. Jon White were in attendance, but did not speak publicly. Mr. Wilburn did say a joint meeting between the township board, the schools and what's left of the cablevision committee will be held Jan. 31 at the township hall.

"I have worked hard through the years and it's always been a mission of mine to make sure that businesses, government and the schools work hand in hand. We are the three strongholds of the community," Mr. Wilburn said.

"This is an embarrassment to me. Airing our dirty laundry that's been laying around for four years before I came on the scene. Sorry I got ill. Well, I'm back now and we're going to sit down like ladies and gentlemen and we're going to fix this. That's what our children expect us to do."

"They don't expect us to bicker in the newspaper about it. I'm sick of it. We're going to solve this problem and get it taken care of."

MEAN - 1/18/06