

# Cablevision urges township to pay \$60,000 to schools

BY JOSHUA KENNEDY  
Bedford NOW

The Bedford Township Cablevision Advisory Committee next month will recommend that the township board repay \$60,000 in skipped allotments to Bedford Public Schools.

The money was supposed to come from the franchise fees paid to Bedford by Buckeye Cable Co. for use of public rights of way to operate their local cable network.

But about three years ago, dissatisfied with the "return" they were getting for paying a contract-mandated \$20,000 to the schools, the township board opted to axe the funding and hire Triple "L" Productions of Lambertville to carry out broadcasts of board meetings.

The committee's recommendation — slated for the Jan. 17 board meeting — recommendation also includes urging that the township begin making regularly scheduled payments of \$20,000 a year to the schools, as directed in a March, 1999, agreement between the schools, the township and Buckeye, the current cable franchise in the area.

Local origination money paid by Buckeye — roughly \$170,000 a year — goes directly into the township's general fund, according to Andrew Gurecky, the township's financial administrator.

When the contract with Buckeye was drafted, it included language that the township would 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.

"Then about three years ago, a couple of the township board members felt they were not getting anything in return for what they called their money," said schools Superintendent Jon White, who said the school district did not ask the cable committee to fix the issue.

"But (the township board)

asked us to do things that we couldn't provide ... So they said they were going to sever the agreement," White said.

The services the board asked for were to have each and every one of their twice-monthly board meetings recorded and broadcast over the local public access channel.

"They had missed a year solid," said Clerk Robert Schockman, who sat on the board when the decision to axe the funding was made. "There had been no videotaping of the meetings for over a year.

"The board members were expressing their concerns that the school was not living up to the expectations they had," he said.

It was at that point that the board began shopping around for a company that could videotape the meetings and relay them to the local channel for residents to view. In August 2002 the board hired Triple L for \$6,700 to do just that.

Despite the hiring of Triple L, members of the cablevision committee — the watchdog group meant to oversee the cable contract — said they didn't know the township stopped making the payments until this year, when Mike Murphy, the school's broadcasting teacher, was appointed to the committee.

For most of this year the committee has been trying to track down whether monies have been paid and to whom for what. It's a question they still don't have an answer to.

"Documentation would have to be found to specifically find when the payments stopped," said committee member Bernice Heidelberg. "We think (the schools) did receive a prorated payment in 2002 when (Triple "L") took over.

"But it would have to be determined when the last payment was made," she said. "We couldn't find those specifics, but maybe we weren't asking the right questions."

Former Supervisor R. Lamar Frederick, also on the board when the funding was cut, said former Trustee Medford Barr was the cablevision committee liaison at the time. At the board's request, Frederick said, Barr tried to work with the schools to get the board

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meetings videotaped.

"It was just difficult for the students to start working at 7 at night and not get home till 11 that night. They had school the next day. So that went on for a couple years, with us trying to work out something," Frederick said, adding that at the time Murphy suggested changing the township meetings to 3 p.m.

"Well, finally Barr recommended to the township board that we stop paying them if they weren't going to do anything for the community," Frederick said.

So they stopped. White, then an assistant superintendent, publicly complained about the decision at a township board meeting.

"I spoke at a board meeting and respectfully disagreed with them to no avail," he said.

Since then, the schools have been making do by skipping repairs and holding off purchases of new equipment, he said.