

# Cable franchise controversy splits school board, township

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Bedford Now

Action by the Bedford Township Board four years ago is threatening to create a rift between the township and Bedford Public Schools.

There's no animosity between the township's two most powerful governments, but everyone expected to address the issue — the township's decision not to pass a portion of cable franchise monies on to the schools — said even discussing the matter could make trouble.

"I've always been a strong supporter of our schools," said Supervisor Walt Wilburn, who, in his second year in office, is finding his cablevision advisory committee's recommendation to repay \$60,000 to Bedford Public Schools his most controversial issue yet.

"Without the schools you really have nothing," he said, after a two-hour meeting last week between township trustees, school officials and current and past members of the cablevision committee.

That meeting was the third between members of each faction over whether the township owes back payments to the schools because of an agreement reached among the panel, township and schools in the late 1990s.

The cablevision panel — a group of local citizens charged with overseeing the township's contract with Buckeye Cable Co. — learned late last year that the township stopped sharing its 4 percent franchise fee with the schools.

"People don't understand that the franchise fee is not money paid by Buckeye Cable," said Gene Stock, an advisory panel member. "People pay that 4 percent fee in addition to their cable bill. Buckeye collects the money and passes it on to Bedford Township."

Each year those fees generate about \$180,000, according to

township and cable officials.

"The township can use those monies unrestricted," Stock said. "They can use it for whatever they want."

Currently, the township puts the money into the general fund. That much of the matter is clear.

What is unclear is exactly how the schools are supposed to benefit — or if they even should.

Part of the contract agreements with Buckeye was that the cable provider would, rather than deal with two governments, pass its franchise fees onto the township and the township would pass some of that onto the schools, according to cablevision committee members.

The agreement 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 from the 4 percent fee collection. The money would help fund the school's broadcasting program.

That money was paid to the schools from 1999 to 2002.

It was a previous township board that halted those payments. Some trustees and township officials claim that part of that agreement was that the broadcasting program would air township board meetings regularly on local public access television.

After a year of making payments without any students televising the meetings — apparently the result of scheduling conflicts with students — township officials in August, 2002, hired Triple "L" Productions of Lambertville to televise the public meetings and stopped paying the schools.

The cable committee charged with oversight of the matter didn't recognize the missed payments until last year.

Stock and Sigmund Gerems-

ki were the only two of the six-member cable committee to be reappointed in January — just weeks after the panel publicly

announced the missing \$60,000 in payments.

Wilburn claims not reappointing the others — includ-

ing longtime panel Chairman Steve Lennex — is only to

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the seat of their pants. And then one day somebody discovered a mistake, and they want to make a big deal about it."

Tom Dawson, the Buckeye Cable official who acts as a liaison between the company and Bedford, doesn't seem to agree. And while he, too, is trying to find a balance on a delicate political issue, he says the schools should be compensated.

"We don't want to take sides in this controversy," he read from a prepared statement during the last meeting on the subject. "Even if the school district does not have a legal right to hold the township and us to the contract, we believe it has a strong moral claim to expect us to honor our promises."

Whatever the intentions of the township board in 2002, Dawson said, "We feel the schools are a beneficiary of the contract, and we want to see it amicably settled. The contract calls for us to pay a 4 percent franchise fee. Out of that, the township was to take \$10,000 and give it to Bedford Schools."ing our dirty laundry in public" a few weeks ago.

And while there have been many meetings already on the matter, there probably are going to be many more.

"Our attorney explained the contract that we have," Wilburn said, referring to the latest meeting. "There's really no agreement or anything like that. Basically there were a lot of verbal agreements made.

"There was a lot of 'You do this for us and we'll do this for you' type stuff," he said.