

Bedford schools may get cash from cablevision group

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For the Evening News

BEDFORD TOWNSHIP - It's called local origination money. In plain English it's money paid by cable companies to use public rights of way, and generally a portion of it goes to public access-type programming.

Bedford Township's Cablevision Advisory Committee next month will recommend to the township board that the township repay \$60,000 to Bedford Public Schools — the township's designated public-access programmer.

The recommendation also urges the township to 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 Cable Co., the current cable franchise in the area.

In Bedford Township, 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 said 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 gave the schools \$20,000 a year — \$10,000 from the cable company and \$10,000 from the township. The money was intended to help pay for the schools' broadcasting program.

The schools received the money 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,'" schools Superintendent Jon White said, adding that the school district did not ask the cable committee to fix the issue.

The township board had asked the school district to broadcast each of the board's twice-monthly meetings, which the schools couldn't do, Mr. White said.

"So they said they were going to sever the agreement," Mr. White said.

"They had missed a year solid," said Clerk Robert Schockman, who sat on the board when the decision to cut the funding was made. "There had been no videoing 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" Productions of Lambertville for \$6,700.

Members of the cablevision committee — the watchdog group meant to oversee the cable contract — claim 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 the money has 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.

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, Mr. Frederick said, Mr. Barr tried to work with the schools to get the board 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," Mr. Frederick said, adding that at the time Mr. Murphy suggested changing the township meetings to 3 p.m.

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

So they stopped. Mr. 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.

"We've been supporting the program with our general fund money and in some cases some technology fund money," Mr. White said. "The program has suffered from the perspective that equipment is expensive and repairs are expensive and we've had to do more with less."

Despite the districts recent statement that \$2.25 million will be trimmed from its annual budget, there's been no public complaining about the missing local origination money — until now.

"The Township had no authority to cut the funding whatsoever," said Steve Lennex, also a member of the cablevision committee. "There was never ever, ever a service standard for the schools. The only thing they are required to do was put a studio in, which they've done.

"Everything else was just for the training of the kids," he said. "I deal in contracts every day. When in doubt, read the contract. They obviously didn't read it.

"The school was never ever contracted on a fee for service basis to tape the meetings," Mr. Lennex said.

Cablevision committee members also point to language within the contract that states no changes to the document may be made without the full consent of each of the three parties.

In August of 2002, Mr. Frederick apparently agreed.

"We still have some obligations to pay," Mr. Frederick is reported in The Evening News to have said to the board at that Aug. 20 board meeting when Triple "L" was hired. "Simply saying we're going to spend \$6,700 doesn't solve the issues on the franchise fees still outstanding.

"We still have obligations. We still owe the school something under the franchise agreements," he said at the time.

The board is slated to consider the cablevision recommendation at the Jan. 17 regular meeting.

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