

CABLE ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

Thursday, SEPTEMBER 17, 2020--6 PM—via Zoom

MINUTES

Present: Jeffrey Diamond, Ed Fechner, Tom Grizey, Neal Pilson, David Wyatt, Sean Wilson. Danielle Filleo acted as Zoom host for the meeting.

Absent: Jill Pompi

The eighth meeting of the CAC was called to order by Committee Co-Chairs Neal Pilson and Ed Fechner at 6:03 PM via Zoom.

Neal Pilson opened the meeting by recognizing two members of the public who were attending – Lauren Broussal, from the Richmond Record, and Rick Bell, Richmond resident. In addition, Michael Mael, Municipal Liaison from the Department of Telecommunications and Cable (DTC), joined at the meeting's opening to discuss the relicensing process steps and timeline.

As the first order of business, the Committee approved by unanimous vote the minutes of the August 20 meeting, which had been circulated previously.

Next, Ed Fechner introduced Michael Mael who laid out the following next steps in the relicensing process

1. First, since Charter/Spectrum has already delivered their "boilerplate" license renewal document to the Committee, the Richmond Board of Selectmen should formally reject that document by vote and then request a 120-day extension of the existing license (to May 18, 2021) to allow time to continue negotiations. Such extensions are common and should not be controversial. The Committee agreed to request time at the Selectmen's meeting on September 30. Ed Fechner and Neal Pilson will attend.
2. Secondly, the Committee should, as a best practice, schedule a public hearing to collect feedback from town residents before meeting with the Selectmen and requesting approval to begin negotiations with Charter/Spectrum. Members of the Committee noted that it has already collected public feedback via emails and a survey as part of the ascertainment process. The Committee tentatively scheduled a public meeting for October 22. Ed Fechner will confirm any requirements for the meeting from the state DTC and confirm the date with Danielle Filleo.
3. Thirdly, the Committee should communicate in writing its requested changes to the relicensing document provided by Charter/Spectrum. Depending on the substance of those comments and requested changes, the Committee and Charter/Spectrum should continue negotiations until they reach agreement. In Mr. Mael's experience, provided the requested terms are similar to terms granted

by Charter/Spectrum to other towns in our area, negotiations should not be difficult.

4. Once the Committee and Charter/Spectrum reach agreement on the terms of the relicense and the company provides the final document, the Richmond Board of Selectmen should act by vote to accept or reject the agreement on behalf of the town.

The Committee then discussed, with Mr. Mael, two specific questions – 1) whether Charter/Spectrum was legally permitted to offer telephone service within the town and 2) how certain costs incurred by Charter/Spectrum for improvements to its service under the relicense would be recovered through the subscriber fees charged to town residents. With respect to the first question, Mr. Mael reported that he was not aware of any agreement by Richmond Telephone Company that prevented Charter/Spectrum from offering telephone service in the town and, so, in his opinion, this service should be allowed, including the “porting” of existing 698-exchange numbers onto the Charter/Spectrum network. Rick Bell then addressed the Committee and reported that he had been advised by Charter/Spectrum recently that they could not provide such telephone service. Based on this discussion, it was generally agreed by the Committee to continue to request that Charter/Spectrum include the offer of its telephone service to town residents in the relicense. With respect to the second question, Neal Pilson commented that, in fairness to subscribers, any costs for improvements to Charter/Spectrum’s service that benefited all residents, such as for televising town meetings, should be paid by all residents and not recovered solely through subscriber fees. Mr. Mael agreed and offered to review an example of Charter/Spectrum’s billing and advise on how the various subscriber fees and charges should be structured. Neal Pilson will provide an example and follow up with Mr. Mael.

Next, Shawn Serre, from Pittsfield Community TV (PCTV), joined the meeting to discuss how his company might assist Richmond in producing and distributing town programming. According to Mr. Serre, the first step is for the town to request and obtain a dedicated channel or channels on Charter/Spectrum’s system. This step could result in three channels (one for government, one for educational and one for public access programs) being provided to all town subscribers. Next, the town would need to purchase and install certain equipment and cabling (a “head-end” or “uplink” and a “hub” for transmitting and distributing programming from town plus a second “hub” to distribute programming via the internet). Although some towns in our area have gone on to also create their own “studios” and employ operators to film programs and actively manage their channels, it is also possible to hire independent videographers to do the filming and operate the hub. Jeffrey Diamond recapped his conversation with officials at West Stockbridge, which spent considerable monies to build and set up their programming facilities however these facilities are still not operating. Mr. Serre’s recommendation was to start small, with a limited amount of programming and using third parties to record and manage the hubs and then grow as needed. Further discussions are necessary, however PCTV could act as the hub manager while the town would remain responsible for the content.

Next, the Committee heard public comment. Rick Bell suggested that the town should experiment with very small-scale programming on the internet, via Zoom or YouTube, until it is clear how much demand exists with residents. Lauren Brousall opined that, to the contrary, recent experience during the pandemic has proven that there is considerable interest in viewing meetings from Town Hall (upwards of 30 viewers/week) and that school productions regularly drew large audiences. In her view, providing easy access to view meetings from home and on demand, as opposed to as scheduled, would increase viewer demand. Furthermore, according to Ms. Brousall, relying on internet channels alone would likely make the programs unavailable to many older town residents who depend on cable for their television media.

Lastly, the Committee discussed its next steps and tentatively agreed to meet again on October 15 at 6pm (via Zoom) to prepare for the public hearing on the 22nd. Neal Pilson will confirm the date and time and circulate the agenda before the meeting.

A motion to adjourn was made, seconded and approved and the meeting ended at 7:53pm.

Respectfully submitted by Sean Wilson, Secretary