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Public Demands More Scrutiny, Delay of Proposed Comcast Deal

Council poised to lock City into a 12-year contract that needs more work, according to Mayor's Cable Commission and other experts

BALTIMORE – Today at 5 PM the City Council is scheduled to take its final vote on the Comcast cable contract, Bill 04-1504. Community television supporters and cable experts say that the vote should be delayed as there are critical problems with the proposed contract that have not been addressed. Baltimore Grassroots Media (BGM) and other community television supporters plan to attend tonight's Council meeting to show their opposition to the contract and to press for a delay to the vote.

Mayor Martin O'Malley's own Cable Advisory Commission has gone on record as opposing the contract. In an Oct. 13th letter that was addressed to both the Mayor and the Council, the Commission wrote, "We urge you to ensure that in the pending franchise agreement, the city's priority is not the stockholders of Comcast but the citizens of Baltimore. Until that time, we recommend that the council not approve this contract." The letter also raises concerns about the return of 4 of the 12 channels currently designated for public, educational and governmental (PEG) programming to Comcast, which, according to calculations made by BGM based on figures given by Comcast, are worth approximately \$77 million over the term of the twelve-year agreement.

BGM has raised concerns about side agreements that are not a part of the main body of the contract that are supposed to provide funding for public access. On Friday, Dec. 3, the group received, for the first time, the text of a side agreement between the city and Comcast for a \$570,000 training grant, the source of promised public access operating funds. The document is pre-dated December 6, 2004 and has not been signed. The agreement letter does not indicate that the \$570,000 will go directly to public access television, only that it will go to the City, where it could be used for any of the PEG channels, including government Channel 21.

Channel 21 had an annual budget of \$1.7 million last year; currently public access Channel 5 has no operating funds and is run out of the Mayor's Office of Cable and Communications.

The City Council claims it is also securing an additional \$430,000 from the City coffers for public access in the form of a memorandum of understanding from the Department of Finance. At the Nov. 29th City Council meeting Councilman Robert Curran motioned to delay final passage of the contract until this MOU could be finalized. BGM has not seen this document and asserts that the final vote should be delayed until this side agreement can be scrutinized by the public.

On Friday night, Dec 3rd, BGM held a public forum on the public access situation in Baltimore. In attendance were several experts on public access from around the country who are submitting a letter today to City Council President Sheila Dixon to urge her to delay the final vote. They are Richard Turner, Executive Director of Montgomery Community Television, Anthony Riddle, Executive Director of the Alliance for Community Media, and Steve Ranieri, Executive Director of Community Cable Channel 27 TV in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Also in attendance was Tom Kiefaber, owner of the Senator Theatre, who has placed a message on the marquee of the theater that reads, "STOP THE COMCAST CABLE CONTRACT! BILL 04-1504 NEEDS PUBLIC SCRUTINY. CONTACT YOUR CITY COUNCIL PERSON."

Baltimore Grassroots Media is a group made up of public access television producers, former public access Channel 5 volunteers, and other concerned citizens who are working to bring public access back to Baltimore and to help it thrive. For more information please go to: www.baltimoregrassrootsmedia.org

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