

City Council approves Comcast contract

12-year cable TV deal is given OK with eye to public access funding

By Doug Donovan
Sun Staff

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The City Council overwhelmingly approved awarding a 12-year cable franchise to Comcast last night after a year of negotiations that recently turned contentious over funding for public access programming.

The 16-1 vote, with two abstentions, was one of the last measures acted on by the departing council at a meeting filled with ceremonial send-offs for seven incumbents not returning Thursday to be inaugurated as members of the newly elected council.

The council's approval delivered a final legislative victory to Mayor Martin O'Malley, who will begin his second term with a noon inauguration today at the War Memorial Building. The cable franchise, O'Malley has said, is the best deal for the city and provides unprecedented funding for channels that broadcast programs produced by the public.

Still, opponents of the deal, bolstered by Councilman Kwame Osayaba Abayomi's "no" vote, continued to voice objections to the contract. Council President Sheila Dixon dismissed the complaints, noting that most who offered them do not have cable or do not live in the city.

"We heard the public loud and clear," said Dixon, adding that the council forced the Board of Estimates to add several key amendments to the contract.

Comcast agreed to charge each of its approximately 120,000 subscribers a \$6 annual fee that would generate more than \$700,000 a year for the capital costs of public access programming on cable Channel 5 and for shows produced by city government on Channel 21 and city schools on Channel 7.

Comcast will also provide \$570,000 over the next 12 years for public access training, plus \$430,000 over the next six years toward a summer youth employment program. Half of that grant will go toward supporting public access programming.

The amendments added and agreed to by Comcast require the cable company to abide by the city's policy on assuring the participation of minorities and women in work done to enhance cable service.

Public access advocates have been clamoring for funding that, at a minimum, would equate to that of the city government's cable access channel. The city government channel operates with state-of-the-art equipment, several staff members and an \$800,000 annual budget that provides for steady programming. Public access has had no funding, and producers must drop off tapes to the mayor's cable office, which airs them without a schedule.

Councilman Robert W. Curran said he hopes the money allotted to support public access will improve the quality of such programs "so the voice of the people can be heard without government censorship."

Councilwoman Catherine E. Pugh said Comcast could have provided more money. "But the reality is we have to start somewhere," she said.

The deal calls for the establishment of a board, appointed by the mayor, that will create a panel to oversee how public access is administered. However Abayomi said he feared support for public access programming would not be sustained.

Critics attracted last-minute support from Senator Theatre owner Thomas A. Kiefaber, who said the city should not have given back to Comcast four of the eight access channels allotted to the city.

"We've never had adequately financed public access," he said.