

MuniVision (available exclusively through *Imperatives*) was featured in the following article which explains the benefits of the system for cities and school districts.

Beyond scrolling screens: Improving government TV

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Government access television a.k.a. The Meeting Channel is at the beginning of huge changes wrought by technology and legislation. For over 20 years, many city governments have been content to offer the community a simple teleprompter-type service with its list of scrolling announcements and the occasional breakaway for live broadcast of regularly scheduled council meetings. Boring!

Fiber optics, streaming video over the Internet, the unresolved battles over what services franchise fees cover, and how to interpret certain provisions of the 1996 federal Cable Act all promise to challenge government access television in the next few years. In the meantime, some forward-looking communities are taking simple steps to upgrade their government channel so that it's more compelling to watch and they are making sure they have expert advice when it comes time to renew the cable franchise.

Farmers Branch, Texas (Pop. 26,000) is one small city that has had an active government access channel, with a full-time producer on staff for the last 17 years and an agreement with the cable company to provide the equipment and personnel to broadcast meetings. Despite that arrangement, the channel and the meeting format hadn't changed much in that time until early 1999 when Mayor Bob Phelps and City Manager Richard Escalante approached the city's communications department about developing a pre-meeting program that would incorporate a full explanation of the consent agenda and the city

manager's report. During meetings, each item on the consent agenda was read aloud followed by one motion to approve; this, combined with the manager's report took up to one-third to one-fourth of the meeting time.

City Council Tonight debuted in May 1999 at 7pm, before the regular council meeting at 7:30pm. The format loosely follows that of a news program and originates in the in-house studios at city hall.

Production begins on the morning of the meeting day and consists of simple graphics, which include the individual consent items superimposed over still photos of the council in action. **Tom Bryson**, the communications director, anchors the show and tapes an introduction in the afternoon followed by a taped explanation of each consent item, which accompanies the graphics. Local or canned public service announcements provide a break before the City Manager's Report, which is pre-recorded that afternoon. Depending on the length of the consent agenda, the show can vary, with the shortest show covering six consent items in 12 minutes; the longest was 29 minutes.

The council has a 4:30pm study session before regular meetings and if consent items are pulled from the agenda, which happens often, the show is re-taped. At the start of the regular meeting, the mayor announces that the full explanation of the consent agenda has aired but that it will be rebroadcast prior to the rebroadcast of the council meeting. He then calls for a single motion to approve the consent agenda. The pre-meeting show has streamlined the regular meeting so that the council now has more time to discuss detailed items.

Cable renewal

Farmers Branch completed its renewal process with the current provider just last year. Bryson says the company, AT&T, is expressly getting out of the access business. While the company still must provide a government access channel, if they have a studio or equipment, they are giving it up to a city or someone else. In the case of Farmers Branch, AT&T owned the equipment at the city's studio and proposed giving it to the city.

"It was antiquated," notes Bryson. "Giving us bad, old equipment wasn't doing us any favors." During negotiations, the city asked them to upgrade the equipment before handing it over; instead, the company gave the city a \$15,000 grant to do it themselves.

In terms of programming, Bryson says the city now has a monthly news show, and is developing a magazine-style show. He describes the city's progress as "taking baby steps, learning as we go."

Bryson also hopes to enhance the meeting broadcast so that if an agenda item needs a video clip to explain it better; that can be inserted. And graphics are being redesigned "so they don't look like they originated in the late 1960s."

"If you're doing it right, it's always a work in progress."

Beyond scrolling text

For those city governments without an in-house production department, a new product is on the market that users say vastly improves the look and effectiveness of a government or school channel. It's called *MuniVision: The Municipal News & Information Channel* (SchoolCast is the educational version).

The product is described as a complete system for creating the content for high-quality cable television. Among the system's features are more than 20 full motion video and animation clips, an extensive collection of over 500 backgrounds, 36 typefaces, more than 180 sound effects, and over 80 musical selections. The system has an event manager, which can be programmed to start a video at a specific time, and it has the ability to switch from video to live programming. It can also be customized, using for instance, the city's seal and photos of the community.

"This is a turnkey package," says **Steve Chick**, salesman with Imperatives, Inc. in Schenectady, N.Y. "Once this system is up and running, a secretary can update each week." Highland Beach, Fla. (Pop.3,500) has used MuniVision for about a year. Previously the city had just scrolling text and background radio music.

"It gives you the opportunity to design a page just the way you want the community to see it," says **Claudette Zaccardi**, administrative assistant and sole operator for the system. "We've gotten lots of compliments. They like the visuals."

The superintendent of the Mahopac School District in New York credits the passage of a school bond referendum to the product, which was installed there three years ago.

"Now it's the primary place to find out what's going on in the community," says **Don Beverly**, director of technology for the district. The local government and the community use the channel for announcements. Beverly describes the system as similar to a Power Point presentation but it can also control other equipment and devices.

"The superintendent set it up before I came and the secretaries maintain it," he says. "It requires very little training."

The \$7,000 base price covers the software, hardware, installation, and training as well as follow-up phone support. Chick says some communities have even gotten local corporations or the cable company to purchase the equipment in return for a sponsorship announcement, much like public broadcasting does. Optional features include such things as weather equipment, a digital camera, and flatbed scanner, and a Spanish language edition.

Resources:

For a free demonstration video of **MuniVision** (*The Municipal News and Information Channel*), call Imperatives at **888-356-5160**.

Alliance for Community Media is a membership organization of government, public, and educational access organizations, which provides advocacy and technical assistance (**www.alliancecm.org**)

www.gatvinstitute.org: This website was launched in April 2000 by the Southern California and Nevada Chapters of the National Association of Telecommunications Officers and Advisors. It has articles, resources, equipment budgets, sample forms, practical advice, and more for managing government access channels.