



Letters to the Editor for October 17, 2024

October 17, 2024

Community Media Wainscott October 10, 2024

Dear David,

Cable Access Channels, often called public, educational, and government (or PEG) access channels, are not something that many people give much thought to. Local TV, Inc. (LTV) understands that, because we are your local public access station with two public-access channels. We are realistic about who we are. Chances are, most people have come across LTV while scrolling through channels. We are on Channel 20 and 22 on the Cablevision/Altice network. As you quickly scroll by, you might see coverage of a town or village meeting or a locally produced television show.

It's the same around New York State: When most people think of their local cable-access channel, they think of government meetings, whether that be the local boards, school-board meetings, or the like. While government coverage is an important focus for LTV and other stations (including allowing residents to view previous meetings and increase government transparency), some stations -- including LTV -- do more than that.

We film, broadcast, and archive community events, and allow community members to produce their own shows. We provide event and performance space for community theater, musical events, forums, lectures, and other activities that benefit and educate the East End community. We have an archive of close to 30,000 shows and films, many dating back to the early 1980s, which we have partnered with the East Hampton Library to digitize and make available to all. We provide many different services to our community and we feel good about our progress.

However, there is a major problem facing LTV and PEG stations across the state: funding. We stations rely on franchise fees from cable companies for most, if not all, of our funding. In short, cable subscribers pay a franchise fee to the cable company as part of their cable bill.

A portion of those fees then go to local municipalities to be used to pay for a PEG-access station, equipment costs, personnel, etc. In our case, a percentage of the money received by East Hampton Town and East Hampton Village is passed on to us for those reasons. LTV is not part of the local government, nor is it a burden to the community. We are not funded by taxpayer dollars. We rely on the franchise fee, grants, and the generous donations from the community.

This funding model worked well in years past. Now, though, many customers are canceling their cable subscriptions in favor of online streaming services. As the number of cable subscribers drops, so does the available funding for PEG stations. This is forcing many stations across the country to make tough decisions on what they can and cannot provide for the local community. As funding continues to decline, stations may face the choice of either cutting back on coverage or closing their doors for good.

It is a reality that the staff and board at LTV think about constantly. However, there is a possible solution being proposed. Legislation has been filed called Senate Bill S2581A. If passed, this legislation would impose a fee on streaming services for using public utilities (sidewalks, telephone poles, etc.), much the same way that cable companies have to pay the fee. The money collected would then be distributed to PEG stations and community media centers across the state based on population and would provide a new source of funding to ensure the continued operation of PEG-access stations around the country.

We believe that PEG stations provide an invaluable service for communities across the state. While often viewed as a relic of the past, the services that cable-access stations provide are more important now than they've ever been. Broadcasting government meetings, covering community events, and letting citizens produce their own shows are just a small part of what these stations do, including LTV. Without modernizing the funding structure these stations rely on, we could soon see them disappear completely. The Legislature must act quickly to pass the necessary legislation to keep cable access alive.

MICHAEL D. CLARK
Executive Director
Local TV