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Report related cable-TV

Report to Town Meeting on Warrant Article 61 of the 2000 Annual Town Meeting

Submitted by Glenn Koenig (16 Hopkins Road, Pct. 8)

In the Spring of 2000, I came before you, representing a group of citizens here in Arlington, and asked for money to hire a consultant. We wanted to conduct an ascertainment study of local media, including local access cable TV in Arlington.

An ascertainment study of this kind typically costs between \$40,000 and \$60,000. Town Meeting at the time, voted only \$5,000 because that's all the Town had available and that's all we asked for. The money came from a fund held in another warrant article by the Selectmen's Cable Advisory Committee, so it required no increase in taxes and did not take money from any other department in town.

So, what did we do with the \$5000? We did hire a consultant to help determine how to proceed. We wanted to know how to maintain and improve our local media while in the midst of a rapidly changing world, both in communications technology and in the companies that provide the services, as you all know.

I'm happy to say that the consultant we hired has given us a great amount of help and we still haven't used up the entire \$5000! So, I think we're doing pretty well.

After quite some research, we have become convinced that establishing a non-profit organization to manage our studio facilities and public media program in Arlington is the way to go.

- Non profit "access corporations" have been successful in almost all of the many communities around the state that have established them
- An access corp. gives more control to the community than a facility managed by the cable TV company
- Instead of providing the equipment, personnel, and supplies, the cable companies provide funding directly to the access corp., specified by the license with the town

Here's what this additional control will provide:

- allow all cable subscribers (both Comcast and RCN) to view the programs recorded in our studio (right now approximately 3000 RCN households cannot view the programs)
- provide for more personnel to keep the facility open for more hours per week, provide a greater range of services, and accommodate more members of the community who want to contribute
- allow expansion of services from a TV studio to a community media center, including more community information on the internet, a greater variety of classes and workshops, better support for public meetings, etc.

The license with RCN has already been negotiated with the town, based on this model. Funds are already being deposited in an account by RCN for this purpose. The current license with Comcast must be renewed by 2005. If we are going to change the contract so that we have an access

corporation to manage our studio, we must start now so that everything is ready by that time.

To date, we have:

- researched how a non-profit access corporation of this kind is formed, including gathering information from some of the other communities that have done it
- formed such a corporation, now known as Arlington Community Media, Inc., in late March of this year (a little over one month ago)
- appointed officers and six directors to our board, with the eventual goal of 15 directors, in order to represent more interests in town and expand the range of our board's skills and expertise.
- adopted by-laws
- obtained a federal ID number
- established a treasury
- approved a dues structure for membership

We are now:

- establishing membership policies and procedures
- preparing to file for federal tax exempt status
- setting up a database to track our membership
- discussing how to fund an ascertainment study

An ascertainment study is a comprehensive study of the town's needs for public telecommunications infrastructure and services, conducted by an independent firm, to produce a report with verifiable findings. Such a report is essential in supporting the town's position with the cable companies for maximum support as provided by law. In other words, it's a sound investment; spend some money up front, gain more in the long run.

We're doing all of this without using a single additional dollar of tax money. Even the ascertainment study will, hopefully, not require any tax money. We'll be talking with the Board of Selectmen soon about ways to have that funded entirely by money already collected from cable subscribers (via the cable companies), membership dues, and independent fundraising.

You started us off by giving us \$5,000. We hope to return much more than that, as public benefit to the town, in the form of education, available to people of all ages, continued coverage of town government and issues, such as this town meeting, School Committee and Selectmen's meetings, other public meetings, town events, and so on.

I want to thank you for your support and look forward to working with everyone in town to make this a success.