



They're wired: Public-access TV connects municipalities, residents

Several Colorado communities consistently sweep the top national awards for premiere local government cable channel programming. Here's how they do it, and why a cable television channel can be such an effective communications tool for local governments.

Pictured above, the Aurora News Set... more than 37,000 Aurora households regularly tune into AURORA8 and its nightly and weekly news programs.

By Jan Dexter-Blunt

And the winners are... The audience waits with anticipation as the final awards of the evening are announced, naming the communities with the best government-access cable programming in the country... "And the winners are: the City and County of Denver...the City of Arvada...Douglas County... the City of Lakewood... the City of Aurora." Yet another clean sweep for Colorado!

Year after year, local governments in the Denver metro area are teaching the entire nation the right

way to do government television, providing a significant benefit to their organizations and their constituents in the process. They demonstrate daily that a properly supported and operated cable channel, with its ability to use emotion-provoking pictures and sound as well as words, can go a long way toward conveying a government's plans and goals while keeping residents informed about local news, events and issues.

Communities with successful cable operations have usually negotiated savvy franchise agreements with

Continued on page 15

Continued from page 13

cable providers, often with the help of nationally-known Denver telecommunications attorney Ken Fellman and the model franchise agreement prepared by Fellman and the Greater Metro Telecommunications Consortium for whom he acts as counsel. Through well-designed cable franchise agreements, these local governments have preserved the rights granted to them by the federal government to have access to one or more cable channels. In many cases, they have used these agreements to secure equipment, facilities and/or funds for ongoing capital expenses associated with their cable operations.

Fellman is also mayor of Arvada and a big fan of government-access cable channels like Arvada's own KATV, the 2003 winner for its size in the Overall Excellence in Government Programming awards hosted by the National Association of

Telecommunication Officers and Advisors. Mayor Fellman, who hosts "Arvada Insights" on KATV, proclaims, "Our government-access channel has been a big success in Arvada. Televising City Council and Planning Commission meetings gives our citizens the ability to stay connected to their city government at the time and in the manner that is most convenient for them. Our informational programming is also widely watched, and disseminates valuable information about issues like public safety, transportation, parks and open space in an interesting and entertaining format. And our most popular show is (no surprise) – high school football!"

Elected officials and management in other cities appreciate their successful cable operations as well. "Broadcasting our City Council meetings over KLTv8 brings democracy into our citizens' living rooms," says Mayor Steve Burk-

holder about Lakewood's cable channel, which reaches more than 30,000 homes. "What better way to get people to become part of their community. It's one of the best additions we have ever made to our city."

Sharing resources

Even cable providers acknowledge that a well-run government-access channel can be a win-win proposition for everyone. "We are pleased to partner with many cities on government-access channels," says Denver-based Mary White, senior vice president of Comcast Cable. "The local information that the channels provide is very valuable to our customers, and we frequently hear positive feedback from them about the programming." Through agreements with the company's predecessors in Denver and still honored by Comcast today, government-access cable channels in the Denver metro area are located on Cable Channel 8,

making it easier for people to locate and to promote programs airing region-wide.

With Comcast's assistance, the "Metro Voices" series, featuring topics of regional interest produced by and for the member communities of the GMTC, are simulcast on all metro area Cable 8s. Honored by DRCOG and many national organizations, recent "Metro Voices" specials have included shows about the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District, surviving the drought, West Nile Virus, meth labs, and legislative and ballot issues. Upcoming shows will focus on the Urban Drainage and Flood Control District and commuter rail proposals.

"Metro Voices" program chair and City of Thornton Communications Manager Jan Blunt notes that "each of our regional programs is spearheaded by a different GMTC member community, often with assistance from a freelance producer and video shot by other communities within the GMTC. Although it's hard to fit in the hours needed to produce 'Metro Voices' shows while keeping up with our own community's projects, we believe strongly that working together benefits us all." Following a recent decision by the GMTC board, future "Metro Voices" specials will be available for purchase and air by non-GMTC communities.

Cooperative efforts can make a huge difference in the amount of quality programming available on a government cable channel. Joni Inman, a past president of the GMTC and director of Lakewood's Mayor and City Manager's Office, notes that "cooperation among the various local government-access channels allows a better use of time, talent and dollars." With a budget of only about \$150,000 and two full-time staff people, Lakewood gets a big bang for the buck by working with other entities in and out of the

metro area to exchange and obtain programs like "A Million Stories" from the Jefferson County School District, a fire-safety program from the West Metro Fire District, and "Tree House Tales," a California children's show.

Lakewood and Douglas County also work with the City of Arvada to produce the award-winning "Let's Talk" program featuring a different prominent Coloradoan each month,

These local governments have preserved the rights granted to them by the federal government to have access to one or more cable channels.

from politicians and top government officials to media and sports celebrities. The show is aired on about a dozen cities metro-wide, and is available at a low cost to other communities.

Meetings & more – defining viewers' program interests

When it comes to grabbing viewers, City of Lakewood research shows that viewers of KLTV like programs that give them government information while still being entertaining. Lakewood Television Services Coordinator Kit Lammers says "We could give viewers the same information with a talking head or a

scrolling bulletin board, but instead we take the information and turn it into a story with good writing, graphics, and video – that's what television is all about."

Conducting a research study can help a community make better use of their cable channel by helping to identify who might be watching and what type of programming they want to see. According to Steve Hansen, marketing director for award-winning Denver 8 in the City and County of Denver, recent research shows that the channel is viewed weekly by 67,480 cable subscribers – equal to local viewing levels for C-SPAN television. Nearly 84,000 households tune in at least once a month. Typical Denver 8 viewers are 35-54 years old, and are longtime or native residents of Colorado. They are college-educated homeowners who have an interest in civic activities and are well versed or involved in community issues, current public affairs, local history and politics.

This accounts for the fact that the most popular programming on Denver 8 pertains to the activities of Denver City Council (weekly full council meetings and 10 biweekly council committee meetings), administration, Mayor's Office meetings, and related press conferences, all of which are shown live and repeated in gavel-to-gavel style coverage.

Discussion programs that focus on education, social issues, safety and neighborhood services also are popular. Denver 8 supplements this type of locally produced programming with acquired content that addresses the origins and workings of democracy, American history, health, employment, education and literacy and the arts. Many other successful government-access cable channels do the same, often turning to the Annenberg Learning Channel for free PBS programming available

by satellite, and to sources such as NASA, U.S. military news operations, Sea World, foreign language series, old movie packages and other free or low-cost sources.

The City of Aurora also has research that backs their programming rationale as well as the impact of their cable channel on the community. Surveys show that more than 37,000 Aurora households regularly tune into AURORA8, one of the first government-operated television channels in Colorado, now celebrating 22 years of municipal cable programming. The typical AURORA8 viewer might initially find the station by “channel surfing,” but research shows that viewers who have watched one of Aurora’s locally produced programs usually come back for more.

In addition to cablecasting city council meetings live, AURORA8 produces a half-hour news show called “Aurora News Weekly,” the monthly newsmagazine “Aurora Images,” taped on location throughout the city, as well as a nightly news update. AURORA8 public affairs programming includes “Dateline... Aurora” and the metro area’s only live mayoral call-in show, “First Thursday” with the mayor and City Council.

Douglas County Government has taken a different approach to govern-



Kit Lammers, Lakewood television services coordinator, in the city’s station control room.

ment television, with an emphasis on county history and with top-notch production standards more typical for a national PBS station. DC8 programs have played not only in Douglas County, but on a national level promoting history on such programs as A& E’s “America’s Castles,” “The Oprah Winfrey Show,” “David Letterman,” and on PBS.

Government cable-channel operators around the country hold the county’s Emmy-award winning DC8 and its manager Jess Stainbrook in awe. “We provide a look at our communities through historic, educational and informational material rather than broadcasting the meetings,” says Stainbrook. “We like to create a sense of community by involving local people in our productions as well as by delving into the past in a way that makes learning

about our local history interesting and fun.”

Largely due to the success of DC8’s programs, which include their award-winning “Legends & Oddities” series, “Search for the B-17,” “The Historic B&B Café,” “Cherokee Trail,” the local library and history collection have reported an increased interest in local history, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by county commissioners.

Setting up shop – frugal to fantastic and points between

There’s never been a better time to start or expand a government-access cable channel. Broadcast-quality equipment has never been less expensive, easier to use or taken up less space. It’s possible to start with a capital investment of less than \$100,000 and one to two dedicated employees, so long as research is done properly ahead of time. To learn about the latest equipment options, attend a video trade show such as the *Rocky Mountain Film & Video Expo* held in Denver in October, the *National Association of Broadcasters Conference* held in Las Vegas each April, or the *Government Video Technology Expo* held in Washington, D.C. in December.

If your cable franchise agreement has a Public Education Government-access contribution provision, it usually doesn’t take long to accumulate sufficient funds to purchase equipment. Typically, franchise holders ask their cable provider for \$.50 per cable subscriber per month – just a few cents more than the cost of mailing a letter – which may be passed to the customer by the provider. A community with 10,000 subscribers would collect \$5,000 in PEG fees a month, or \$60,000 over a year, from the cable provider. It is important to note, that federal law only allows PEG contributions to be used for capital expenses and not for staffing.

Resources

- Greater Metro Telecommunications Consortium, www.gmtc.org, “Metro Voices” Chair Jan Blunt, 303-538-7238 or jan.blunt@cityofthornton.net.
- National Association of Television Officers and Advisors, www.natoa.org
- Alliance for Community Media, www.alliancecm.org
- Annenberg Learning Channel, free PBS programming, www.learner.org
- Government Video Technology Expo in Washington, D.C., Dec. 4-5, www.gvexpo.com
- 3CMA (City County Communications & Marketing Association), www.3cma.org (national conference to be held in Denver in September, will feature seminars on government-access cable channels and a tour of Denver metro area cable facilities)

Following a humble beginning in a one-room closet with a computer bulletin board, today's KLTV is at home in the City of Lakewood's recently completed municipal complex. Surrounded by editing suites, an audio booth and well-equipped production control room, their pride and joy is the new multi-faceted production studio, nominated for a regional Emmy award. Lakewood has generously allowed other communities and the GMTC to use its state-of-the-art facility.

Aurora's new municipal building houses its state-of-the-art facility, too, complete with a broadcast-quality news set and interview area. AURORA8 regularly serves as an information source for other municipalities seeking advice on starting, equipping, programming or operating a station using the funds and channel allocation received in their cable television franchises. Station managers have advised officials

from Brighton, Broomfield, Denver, Erie, Colorado Springs, Georgetown and Fort Collins, and Provo, Utah on municipal television issues.

While cities like Lakewood, Aurora and Denver maintain and get substantial return from their fairly large production studios, such studios are not crucial for a channel's success. Other cities rely entirely on footage shot in the field, most using "prosumer" digital camcorders, or convert their video-equipped Council Chambers into studios. Others use computer-generated backgrounds behind on-camera persons in even smaller settings (take a look at www.seriousmagic.com).

Staffing for video facilities vary widely, from one or two full-time employees to a dozen or more, often with part-time employees, freelancers and interns thrown into the mix. There's no simple equation, but it's safe to say that the more personnel available to research, write,

shoot, edit and finish programs, the more hours of original programming can be produced.

The bottom line with any government-access cable operation is the return on the investment. According to Lakewood City Manager Mike Rock, "Our Channel 8 has opened up a whole new level of communication in the community, and I am constantly surprised and pleased to hear from people who will stop me anywhere from the grocery store to out on the street and say 'Gee, I was flipping through channels the other night and I watched the council meeting, and I have the following question or I have the following comment.' We've achieved a much wider market penetration than we ever thought we would." ■

Jan Dexter-Blunt is communication manager for the City of Thornton and chairs the "Metro Voices" regional programming committee of the GMTC.