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**Project Title:** Highland Park Public Access Television Center

## **Highland Park Public Access Television Center**

In 2008, Comcast notified the City of Highland Park that it would be ceasing operation of its local public access studio on December 31, 2009. Recognizing that the Highland Park community has a long tradition of utilizing and supporting public access television, the City of Highland Park worked cooperatively with Comcast and neighboring communities to preserve public access television and assumed responsibility of the previous Comcast studio. The City worked with Comcast to relocate Comcast's studio to the lower level of the Highland Park Police Station Headquarters ("Headquarters"). Additionally, the City entered into intergovernmental agreements with the Village of Deerfield and Village of Winnetka, thereby making this resource accessible to the three communities. On February 1, 2010, the Highland Park Public Access Television Center ("Center") reopened for video production, editing and playback.

## **History**

Over the past three decades, Comcast and its predecessors provided funding for local public access television operations in Highland Park. As a result of this funding, both the Highland Park community and surrounding areas have established a long tradition of utilizing and supporting public access television as a means of enhancing communication with area residents regarding news, events and local public affairs. In 2008, Comcast notified the City that it would be ceasing operation of the studio by the end of 2009. Recognizing the importance of public access television among the community, the City assumed responsibility of the previous Comcast studio and reopened the studio as the Highland Park Public Access Television Center on February 1, 2010.

## **Center's Importance**

The City of Highland Park, along with several other surrounding jurisdictions, utilizes the government and education access channels as key communication tools to reach residents. If the City had not committed to assuming control of the Center, it would have lost an important method of communication to its residents. Furthermore, there has been a long tradition around public access television within the community, which would have ended if the City had not continued the Center. One group that utilized the previous Comcast studio weekly was the Senior TV Production Team ("Team"). The Team is a group of members from the Senior Center of Highland Park that produces, edits and broadcasts programs through the Center. The Team also uses the Center as a means of socializing. Had the City decided to discontinue the Center, the Team would have lost its ability to communicate to the community and socialize.

## **How is it a quantum leap of creativity?**

The Center is a quantum leap of creativity for several reasons. First of all, the City entered into intergovernmental agreements with two surrounding municipalities, which allowed the City to share the Center's operating costs. In today's economy, it is very important for municipalities to reduce costs while still providing the same level of service that residents are use to. By entering into intergovernmental agreements with the Villages of Deerfield and Winnetka, the City was able to do both.

Secondly, the City relocated the studio into new and unused space by remodeling the lower level of the Headquarters, which reduced the City's overhead costs and increased the City's ability to communicate directly with residents. By remodeling the lower level of the Headquarters, the

City did not have to incur any overhead costs that would have been associated with staying at the previous studio's location. Additionally, the new location allows for City staff to quickly and efficiently broadcast live information to residents in case of an emergency.

Finally, the Center is a quantum leap of creativity because it was a new area of development for the City. Prior to the Center, the City did not have experience operating a public access studio. Through the Center, City staff has learned how to operate a studio, including the equipment and software necessary for broadcasting programs.

### **Who has benefited from the innovation?**

Several organizations and individuals have benefited from the Center. First of all, the City of Highland Park, and Villages of Deerfield and Winnetka have benefited from the Center because they are able to continue broadcasting municipal meetings and programs for residents on each individual government access channel. Secondly, the residents of the three municipalities benefit from the Center because they are able to continue viewing municipal and public programs. Additionally, residents and employees of the three municipalities have the opportunity to utilize the Center's facility and equipment. Finally, the producers who were utilizing the Comcast studio have benefited from the Center because they are able to continue broadcasting their programs on public access channel 19 and utilize the facility and equipment. Currently, there are over 60 producers, including the Senior TV Production Team, who utilize the Center to produce, edit and broadcast programs. Since the Center opened in February, over 1,000 municipal and public programs have been broadcasted through the Center regarding issues such as health, government, music, theatre, sports and home improvement.

### **How was the innovation initiated and implemented?**

The Center was initiated in 2008 when Comcast informed the City that it would be ceasing operation of its local public access studio by the end of 2009. Understanding that there is support for public access television within the community, the City committed to assuming responsibility of the previous Comcast studio. The City worked cooperatively with Comcast and other neighboring communities to implement the Center. Between October 2009 and February 2010, the City and Comcast met on a weekly basis to discuss implementation and relocation of the Center. Additionally, the City met with neighboring communities and invited them to enter into intergovernmental agreements for the use and operation of the Center. To date, the Villages of Deerfield and Winnetka have entered into agreements with the City through December 31, 2011.

### **What risks were associated with planning and developing the innovation?**

There were several risks associated with planning and developing the Center. The first risk was that the City did not have commitment from other communities when it agreed to assume responsibility of the Comcast studio. At the time of initiation, there were nine jurisdictions that broadcasted through the Comcast studio. The City and Comcast met with the nine jurisdictions to invite them to join the Center in order to continue broadcasting their programs and reduce operating costs. Of the nine, three jurisdictions committed to the Center; however in May 2010, one of the jurisdictions ceased broadcasting on its government access channel and therefore discontinued its use of the Center. Since it committed to assuming responsibility of the Center, the City would have been responsible for all of the 2010 operating costs, which included the costs of remodeling the lower level of the Headquarters, staffing the Center with two part-time

employees, and purchasing equipment. In 2010, each municipality was responsible for paying a one-time relocation cost in addition to the fixed rate per access channel. The City was able to recover 50% of its operating costs in 2010.

Another risk associated with implementing the Center was the location. The City determined that it was not economically feasible to continue operating the Center out of the previous Comcast studio location and instead recommended that the lower level of the Headquarters be remodeled into the Center. In order to obtain access to the Center, visitors must exchange identification cards for an electronic swipe at the dispatch window. This method has increased the amount of activity at the dispatch window over the last ten months. Additionally, there is potential for community producers to gain access to secured areas of the Police Department such as the 911 Communications Center, which holds valuable equipment and information. In order to decrease these risks, City staff has established a method for effectively and efficiently managing and monitoring the increased activity.

The third risk that the City found when implementing the Center was due to the equipment. Comcast donated the majority of the equipment from the previous studio, which ranges from 3 to 20 years of age. By accepting the donated equipment, the City took on a risk because the majority of the equipment is antiquated and therefore the Center could experience technical difficulties. In order to decrease this risk, the City needed to ensure it had adequate funding to hire a technician that was qualified to address the diverse collection of equipment.

#### **What was the environment in which the innovation was created and sustained?**

Overall, the City implemented the Center in a very supportive environment. The City Council, City staff and Comcast were all very supportive of the City assuming control of the Center. During the first few months of implementation the City did encounter some hesitation from community producers who did not feel the City could effectively and efficiently operate a public access studio. City staff was able to dissolve the producers' concerns through one-on-one meetings.

#### **What were the execution costs and savings?**

Comcast donated a majority of the equipment that was at the previous studio, as well as provided several hours of labor, both of which resulted in a cost savings of over \$200,000 for the City. During implementation and the remainder of 2010, the City spent \$47,000; however the City was able to recover 50% of the total through the intergovernmental agreements.

#### **What lessons were learned that could be shared with other local governments?**

The City learned several lessons while implementing the Center. The first lesson is that partnerships are beneficial to the success of programs and projects. The City partnered with Comcast and other jurisdictions to implement the Center. Through the City's partnership with Comcast, the City was able to learn the best practices of operating a public access studio, qualifications to seek in technical staff, and the best choices for equipment. The City was also able to reduce costs through this partnership because Comcast donated over \$200,000 worth of equipment and labor. The City's partnership with other jurisdictions allowed the City to continue providing public access programming to the surrounding communities, which is a valued tradition, while reducing costs.

Another lesson that the City learned was that project teams are essential for successful implementation. The project team met regularly, which allowed members to track the progress of the program and keep communication open between the multiple stakeholders. Regular meetings also allowed the City to have an expedited turnaround from when the Comcast studio closed in late November 2009 to when the Center opened on February 1, 2010.

**Which department and/or individuals championed the innovation?**

The City Manager's Office, Public Works Department, Police Department and Comcast worked together to implement the Center. The project team consisted of Will Jones, Assistant City Manager, Bob McCraren, Superintendant of Facilities and Grounds, George Pfutzenreuter, Administrative Commander, Renee Helm, Administrative Intern, and Frank Deuel, Government Affairs Manager for Comcast.