

Buckland & Shelburne Cable Advisory Boards Public Hearing – 2/27/2008

Overview

A remarkable public hearing was held Thursday, February 27 in Shelburne Falls. On a cold night when the girls basketball team had a home playoff game, and the school committee was holding an important budget hearing, well over 150 people turned out to express their opinions about the cable television contract renewal process for Buckland and Shelburne.

Speakers at the hearing represented a wide cross-section of the two towns, from school children to senior citizens, educators, public officials, telecommuters, stay-at-home moms, business owners small and large, representing banking, real estate, farming, manufacturing, hospitality and many others.

The purpose of the ascertainment hearing was twofold:

- to identify the cable-related needs of the community
- to determine whether the current license holder (Comcast) has met the community's needs

The hearing was unique, in that every speaker supported the same position on the issues. Some expressed the need for cable television to provide entertainment and educational programming, news, weather, community public affairs, and emergency information. Some pointed out the pending loss of available television channels in our area due to the upcoming conversion from analog to digital television broadcasting. A lack of cable television service was described as adversely affecting home values and sales, business competitiveness, and causing families to make hard choices about where they would make their homes.

Many people spoke of the absolute need for high-speed internet service, which is available along with cable television service. High-speed internet service in today's society is now seen as a necessity, as telephone and electric service were seen in the early 20th century.

Several speakers described frustration with Comcast's failure to deliver service to their homes and businesses, citing broken promises from the company's sales and marketing departments, and wildly varying, but always prohibitively high cost estimates for service extension.

The meeting provided a clear sense of the community regarding the two questions at hand:

- The number one cable-related need in our communities is to provide cable access for all residents and businesses
- That Comcast is not currently meeting that need

This ascertainment hearing left the Cable Advisory Board with a clear impression that our contract renewal negotiations with Comcast should be framed within the context that the next contract must include a proposal to provide service to all potential customers within the contract term.

A more detailed report of the comments made at the hearing follows.

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The public hearing opened with introductory remarks from Glenn Cardinal, Buckland resident and Chair of the joint Buckland-Shelburne Cable Advisory Committee. Committee Attorney Bill August and Comcast representative Steven Fitzgibbons were introduced and the floor was opened to comments from the public. More than 160 members of the public attended the hearing. Fifty two individuals offered testimony, including 32 from Shelburne, 15 from Buckland, 1 business owner from Charlemont, 1 Colrain resident, and 3 unidentified speakers. Several issues were raised by multiple speakers. Specific issues raised include the following:

Cable Television specific comments
Statement of general desire for cable television service
Critical need for cable service for long-term viability of community
Fairness issue that some residents are deprived of service
CATV service is long overdue in unserved areas
Lack of educational TV programming is harming children/students
Need access to emergency information from PEG origination points
Desire to observe public hearings, select and school board meetings, other public events
Need access to weather information from Hartford & Springfield TV stations
Need access to local news reports
Desire full access to NFL and other sports events
Young people reluctant to return to area due to lack of 'normal' amenities
Home-bound/disabled need entertainment, limited TV channels available
Informal surveys of neighbors indicate 100% interest in cable service
Motel/Campground/B&B customers expect cable television service
Home resale values reduced
Rental properties undesirable without cable service
Satellite dishes are unattractive
Satellite dishes lose service when leaves are on trees
Satellite service fails in bad weather – heavy rain, snow
Local channels (including PBS) not always available through satellite
Hi-definition broadcasts not available over airwaves – analog to be discontinued in 2009
Seeking unified service provider for TV, Internet and Telephone
Cable Broadband Internet comments
Home-based businesses require broadband internet access
Individuals with health issues require broadband
Home resale value reduced due to lack of broadband
Many hours of time lost due to dial-up internet inadequacy
Dial-up access ties up phone line in case of emergency
Home computer software cannot be effectively maintained/updated
Most websites assume high-speed connections
From mortgage banking perspective – broadband is a necessity
New MA Dept. of Ed. system for Teachers/Students – Assumes/requires high-speed internet access
Teachers unable to access school-based systems from home
Students unable to conduct research, access educational websites
Unable to transact business on Ebay due to dial-up inadequacies
Satellite Internet access fails in bad weather, is slow, has low bandwidth limits
Government information available via internet requires broadband for access
Businesses are at a severe competitive disadvantage without broadband access
Broadband services are more widely available in third-world countries than here
Businesses face high cost for fractional T1 service
Senior citizens actively utilizing computers – need broadband
General comments
Access for ALL residents is a necessity, and should be a right
Comcast advertises and promises service, then refuses to deliver
Comcast terminates Verizon service, leaving customers without telephone service