

DIGITAL TV SWITCH

Legislature joins fight against Comcast

Changeover imperils WVPBS, angers viewers who can't get it

By Alison Knezevich

Staff writer

Tired of fighting with the cable company? So are some West Virginia lawmakers — and they're hoping to use the upcoming special legislative session to confront an ongoing conflict with Comcast.

In mid-April — when Comcast began carrying a digital-only signal for West Virginia Public Broadcasting — basic-cable customers in the northern part of the state and the panhandles lost access to the station. They could only watch it if they upgraded their cable package or got a digital converter box.

Now, some legislators are asking Gov. Joe Manchin to address the issue in the special session that starts when the Legislature finishes the state budget.

If fewer people can watch WVPBS, the situation could become a budgetary problem because

COMCAST

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"If they can't make any progress in that regard," Turner said, "then he'll certainly look at putting that on the [special session] call."

The change to how Comcast delivers the WVPBS signal dates back to a 2005 agreement between the Association of Public Television Stations, the National Cable & Telecommunications Association, and the Public Broadcasting Service. It is not related to the federally mandated digital TV switch.

Comcast spokeswoman Jaye Linnen said the company doesn't plan to change the arrangement.

"The agreement that was decided on by West Virginia Public Broadcasting stations and Comcast was a joint agreement," Linnen said. "We're going stand by that agreement."

Most Comcast customers have digital cable, Linnen said. For those who don't, the company is offering a digital converter box that is free for 12 months

"The majority of Comcast customers throughout West Virginia aren't going to be impacted by this," she said.

But WVPBS Director Dennis Adkins said plenty of viewers seem frustrated — and station officials are worried about fundraising efforts, he said.

fundraising will drop off, Delegate Barbara Fleischauer told colleagues Thursday. She said pledges account for between 20 percent and 25 percent of the budget for WVPBS.

"We have invested millions in West Virginia Public Broadcasting," said Fleischauer, D-Monongalia. "It's a public policy issue."

She is proposing a bill to require all cable companies that do business in West Virginia to provide basic-cable subscribers with access to WVPBS.

Since the switch, many angry customers have contacted the company and public officials, Fleischauer said.

"We wouldn't have to have legislation if [Comcast] would do the right thing," she said.

The governor recently discussed the issue with Comcast officials, Manchin spokesman Matt Turner said Thursday.

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"We started our pledge drive Saturday," he said. "[Comcast basic-cable subscribers] are not even going to see the pledge drive."

State Sen. Mike Oliverio, D-Monongalia, said Comcast "duped" WVPBS. "They got taken advantage of," he said.

Last month, Oliverio called in to a Morgantown radio talk show to confront a Comcast representative, he said.

After that, "they sent lobbyists to my office in Morgantown and tried to convince me that what they were doing was right."

Oliverio said people shouldn't have to pay extra for programming they already support with their tax dollars. He added that customers are charged with shipment costs and other fees associated with the "free" digital converter box Comcast offered.

Earlier this month, U.S. Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., wrote to the company, saying Comcast was imposing an "unnecessary burden" in hard economic times.

The Morgantown City Council also recently proposed a resolution urging Comcast to restore WVPBS access to basic-cable subscribers at no extra cost.

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