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STATE CAPITOL

Officials upset over Comcast's WVPB switch

Ask Gov. Joe Manchin to put bill 'on the call'

BY DAVID BEARD The Dominion Post

The state Senate, House and governor's office are up in arms over Comcast's decision to require basic cable customers to rent a digital converter box to have access to West Virginia Public Broadcasting (WVPB).

"We're hopeful we can do something and put as much pressure on Comcast as possible to do the right thing," said Sen. Michael Oliverio, D-Monongalia.

Delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, and several other delegates said WVPB is funded by state money and public donations, and the people who can least afford access to it — basic cable customers — shouldn't be required to pay more for public television.

The action affects Comcast customers in Monongalia and Preston counties, and in the Eastern and Northern panhandles, legislators said.

Oliverio said at least eight senators have called on Manchin to put some legislation "on the call" for both houses to take up when the special session begins. They want WVPB to be available to Comcast's basic cable customers — as U.S. Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., put it in letter on the subject — without additional fees or inconveniences.

Manchin said, through his spokesman Matt Turner, that he wants to try to solve the problem in one of two ways. First, he wants to talk to Comcast to see if the company's action was merely an error, and make WVPB available without the box. If that fails, he will bring up legislation during the special session.

Comcast spokesman Bob Grove said basic cable costs \$15 a month, and the box costs another \$1.10, but all basic customers can get a free box for a year. For those who take the box, WVPB is still available in its original location — Channel 8. Two other services are also available — WVPB2 at Channel 699 and WVPB HD at Channel 712.

He said this is something WVPB agreed to do in order to improve its service. Dennis Adkins, executive director of West Virginia Public Broadcasting, is quoted in a press release endorsing and announcing the change, which took place April 14. The move followed an agreement among PBS, the Association of Public Television Stations, and the National Cable and Telecommunications Association to upgrade to digital service.

Grove also said that 70 percent of its Morgantown-area customers already have digital boxes, and many among the remaining 30 percent have newer, digital-ready TVs that can be programmed to scan for WVPB without a box. That means, he said, the effect will be minimal, and very few customers have called to complain.

"All we can judge it by is what we have heard from our customers," he said.

Those who need a box can stop by the office — past Sabraton on W.Va. 7 for Morgantown customers — or call Comcast to request one, and a channel lineup card.

But legislators said it's unfair to put an additional financial burden on those who can only afford basic cable. Two Jefferson County delegates, John Doyle and Tiffany Lawrence, said they have gotten many calls from constituents.

And down in the trenches, WVPB boosters are upset, too.

WVU Hospitals spokeswoman Amy Johns produces "Doctors on Call," a phone-in medical-advice program that airs Thursdays on WVPB. She has noticed a significant drop-off in calls from Monongalia County.

She said she produces 32 shows a year, and estimates an average of four to five Mon County callers per show who get through to ask a question. In the last four shows, since the change, she's gotten only one Mon County call, total. That means viewers either aren't getting the channel or don't know how to find it.

And Morgantown attorney Dan Ringer has assisted with WVPB pledge drives for 22 years. Another pledge drive is coming up, and he fears that between those who can't access the channel, and those who can't find it in their channel lineup, WVPB will lose thousands of dollars in pledges.

"Everybody's hopeful that Comcast will do the right thing," he said.

WVPB spokesman Bill Acker said about 50 percent of its funding comes from the state, and another 20 percent to 25 percent comes from donors through pledge drives and other gifts. He also fears the consequences if donations drop off.

"Our purpose is to serve" the people of the state, he said, and its mission is threatened if people can't access the channel.