

Metro plea to CRTC: don't change that channel

Regional leaders say loss of community TV would reduce coverage of civic affairs issues

Metro Vancouver officials are expected to make a pitch to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission to save local and community programming, arguing they need a public channel to stay in touch and inform the region's residents about civic affairs.

Regional officials are slated to present the submission to the CRTC on Feb. 2, as part of a public hearing into a review of the commission's policy framework for local and community television programming. Their main concern is the portion of a levy currently allocated to the development of community programming — about two per cent of a cable bill — could be reallocated to local commercial television stations, and result in the demise of Shaw Channel 4.

Metro Vancouver, which represents 21 municipalities and the Tsawwassen First Nation, now runs at least two shows on that channel, including the Sustainable Region newsmagazine show and Metro Vancouver Close-up, which highlights work done at the municipal level to support regional goals.

In the past, Shaw brought in volunteers to record municipal city council meetings. If the channel is cut, it would mean those meetings could only be watched online.

"Metro Vancouver and others produce the content for them, but they at least give us air time," said Greg Moore, Port Moody mayor and chairman of Metro Vancouver. "Putting up content on YouTube is not the same as putting it up on Shaw Channel 4. (People) are not able to watch a half-hour show on YouTube on their computers. It doesn't produce the same visibility as TV."

The submission, which will go to Metro's intergovernmental and finance committee Friday, argues that television remains a complementary medium to the Internet. And while putting material online is easy, it is tough to get it seen.

Regional officials suggest that building an online audience requires hard work and costs money, and individual community members will have little success building or reaching audiences. Moore said while Vancouver issues often get attention from the mainstream media, small communities like his need other outlets to reach the community.

"Our concern is that in its desire to assist the private sector in dealing with the challenges of a changing marketplace, the CRTC will rob Peter to pay Paul," the submission states. "The emphasis in the discussion paper seems to favour private broadcasters as producers of local content over community access providers such as us. We believe that both play very different but complementary roles."

Funding for the broadcast system comes through a mix of taxes, advertising revenues, and through a levy of five per cent on consumers' cable bills — three per cent to the Canadian Television Fund and two per cent to the cable provider, to be spent on community television. Nationally, this amounts to about \$151 million annually, according to Metro's submission.