

COUNCIL ACTION FORM

SUBJECT: TRANSITION OF CHANNELS 16 (PUBLIC ACCESS) AND 7 (AMES COMMUNITY SCHOOLS) TO DIGITAL SERVICE

BACKGROUND:

Several weeks ago, City staff met with representatives of Mediacom to discuss the movement of the City's Channel 16 and the Ames Community School District's Channel 7 from the current analog system to the digital system. This is being requested by Mediacom so that it may free up bandwidth to carry more standard and high-definition (HD) Channels. It will also allow for the operation of a faster high-speed internet service later this year. Eventually Mediacom hopes to have its broadcast service entirely digital.

Staff has spoken with representatives of the Ames Community School District about this request from Mediacom. The District is agreeable to this proposal as long as certain conditions are met. Specifically, the following requests are being made of Mediacom in order for the District to agree to this move:

1. Keep Channel "7" as the numerical channel location on the digital system;
2. Allow the District some access to use new digital channels that result from the transition, like 7.1 or 7.2;
3. Provide converter boxes to all District school sites;
4. Host webstreaming for the District with Mediacom encoding the meetings; and
5. A converter box be provided to anyone who requests one, and not just cable subscribers. If the resident needs to have the box installed by Mediacom, that there not be any trip charge for installing the box.

City staff has expressed to Mediacom as well that there must be a converter box provided to any cable subscriber who requests one, and that Mediacom install it upon request at no charge to the customer. Also, Channel 16 should remain at the numerical Channel "16" after the transition.

The current Public Access Channel is heavily used by churches for re-broadcast of their services. While this transition of channels 16 and 7 to the digital system will provide the means for added benefits to those desiring added high-definition channels on the cable line-up, and faster high-speed internet, there will be residents who may find this less than desirable. The importance of this to the City, is that many viewers of the Public Access Channel will be elderly or disabled (or both), and requesting a box may be a major inconvenience for them. Mediacom must be prepared to provide services to facilitate the transition for those needing assistance, and be prepared to do so quickly. These members of our community will be some of the least prepared to deal with a change in technology.

ALTERNATIVES:

1. The City Council may approve the transition of Channels 16 and 7 to the digital format with the following stipulations:
 1. Keep Channel “7” as the numerical channel location on the digital system;
 2. Allow the District some access to use new digital channels that result from the transition, like 7.1 or 7.2;
 3. Provide converter boxes to all District school sites;
 4. Host webstreaming for the District with Mediacom encoding the meetings;
 5. That a converter box be provided to anyone who requests one, and not just cable subscribers. If the resident needs to have the box installed by Mediacom, that there not be any trip charge; and
 6. That “Channel 16” remain as “Channel 16” on the digital system.
2. The City Council may approve the transition, adding or deleting stipulations as it chooses to do so.
3. The City Council may not approve the transition of the Channels to the digital system.

MANAGER’S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

A number of our residents, particularly in the Somerset area, have complained to the City about a lack of adequate high-speed internet service. By agreeing to relocate Channels 16 and 7 to the digital system, Mediacom will be better able to address these concerns.

Mediacom has indicated that it will heavily publicize not only the change in channel formats, but also what residents must do to continue receiving the channels. **While we hope that the public can be smoothly transitioned in this process, we expect that a number of viewers will be confused and inconvenienced by this change. We expect to receive many calls in our office (as we do any time the channel line-up changes), and look forward to working with Mediacom to quickly resolve those issues that do arise.**

Therefore, it is the recommendation of the City Manager that the City Council adopt Alternative #1 and approve the transition of Channels 16 and 7 to the digital format with the stipulations stated above.