

January 15, 2010

Column: Public access must stay on-air

Editor's note: The following open letter was sent to Wausau Mayor Jim Tipple and local media outlets following the city's decision to shut down its public access cable television stations.

Dear Mayor Tipple:

Thank you for engaging with those of us who feel that public access television is a necessary and vital part of our life together in this community.

Although I disagree with your perspective, I understand and appreciate the budgetary considerations that led to your decision to discontinue funding for Wausau's public, education and government channels (called PEG channels) effective Jan. 31.

From my perspective, these channels are a part of the lifeline that the community extends to Wausau's elderly homebound population. If my calculations are correct, the elimination of these channels will only save taxpayers 3 cents per \$1,000 of valuation. Surely the city can find a more able-bodied population to absorb this small savings.

My preference is that you reverse your decision and maintain cable access television in the city of Wausau. If that is not possible, I am willing to work with you to preserve the channels within this framework:

1. The city must agree to fund the program until at least June 30. It is unrealistic to expect us to find a solution within the next four weeks. It is unrealistic to ask citizens to place our hopes in lawsuits and in legislation with a four-week deadline. It is cruel to punish the city's homebound elderly until a solution can be found.
2. The mayor should appoint a task force of interested parties to find a permanent solution to this problem. I am willing to be a part of such a task force.
3. Should the task force decide to establish a separate nonprofit corporation, the city must agree to participate with a \$10,000 annual budgetary commitment for at least 10 years.

I would like to hear from the city attorney about the impact of state legislation if Wausau cedes its public access channels to a private corporation.

It is of utmost importance to me that Wausau's PEG channels remain operational without interruption. I have begun to have conversations with state legislators. If necessary, I will also present this case to the City Council for its consideration. I know that you understand the importance of these channels for our citizens. I hope and pray that, together, we can find a satisfactory solution to this problem.

The Rev. Gary L. Froseth is the pastor at St. Stephen Lutheran Church in Wausau.