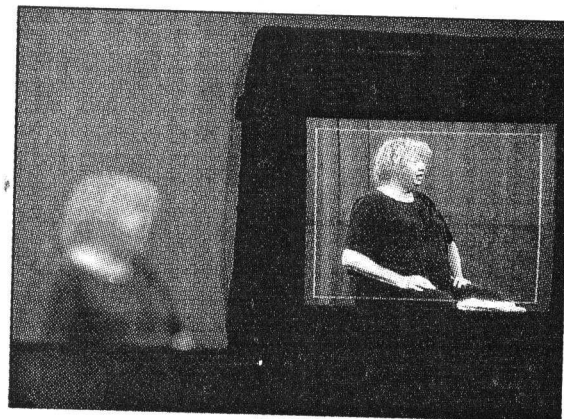
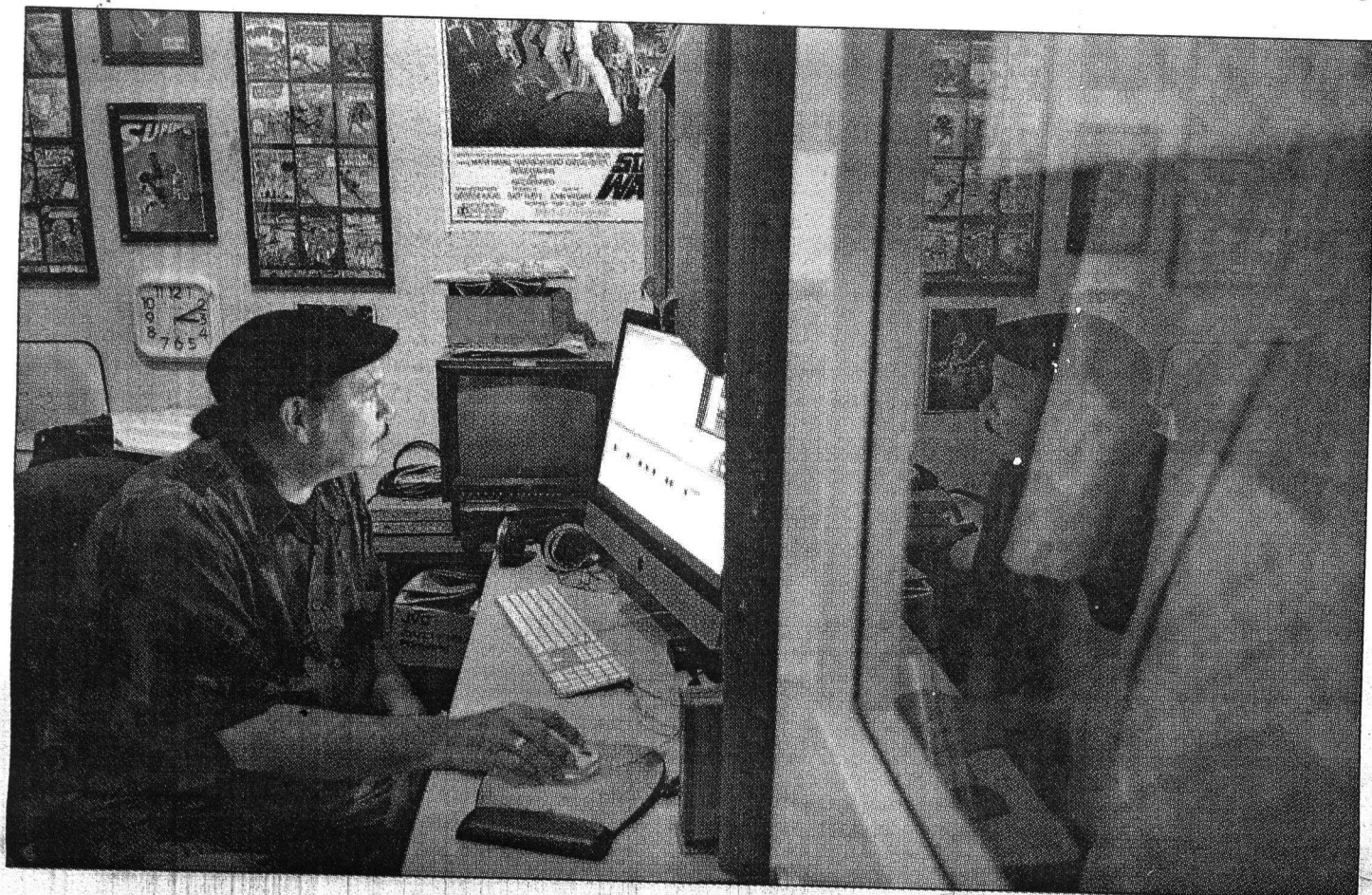


COMMUNITY TELEVISION

Changing Channels



COMMUNITY TV MAY MERGE, RESHAPE PUBLIC ACCESS PROGRAMS



TOP: Sandra Leigh, an independent producer at Community TV, records one of his programs live. ABOVE: Peter McGettigan edits videos of City Council meetings and other special shows for Community TV.

JAMES TENSUAN/SENTINEL

Communications
By JASON HOPPIN

jhoppin@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz County's community television channels, repositories of backyard philosophers, basement production values, karaoke superstars and sepia-toned government meetings, are at a crossroads.

With major funding changes looming, Community TV, a nonprofit that runs three local public access channels for the county and city of Santa Cruz, is preparing for a dramatic reshaping of the group's mission, even exploring a merger with a nearby cable-access operator.

"CTV has been operating somewhat under

SEE COMMUNITY TV ON A2



JAMES TENSUAN/SENTINEL

Bob Ackerly, left, sets up for the next program as Sandra Leigh adjusts his lavalier microphone.

6-10-12
IF YOU GO
FUTURE OF
COMMUNITY TV
MEETINGS

WHEN: 6:30 p.m. Tuesday
and 6 p.m. June 18.

WHERE: 816 Pacific Ave.

**'We're not 'Wayne's
World' anymore.'**

KATHY BISBEE, Community
Media Access Partnership

COMMUNITY TV

Continued from A1

the radar for many years,” said Caryn Machado, who chairs Community TV’s board of directors. “We now hope to have as much community involvement as possible moving forward so we can make the best decisions on behalf of the citizens of Santa Cruz County and the organization.”

In many ways, Community TV is an untapped resource. Few know that behind a Pacific Avenue storefront are a warren of offices and studios that are there to serve the public. People can book studio time, create shows, edit them and have them aired.

But to those who know about it, Community TV is a treasure, airing 13,500 distinct shows since 2005 (not counting government meetings). The enterprising Sandra Leigh even filmed local karaoke contests, capturing a pre-“American Idol” James Durbin, wearing plastic demon horns, doing a full rendition of Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody.”

Local public access programming is funded via Comcast, which provides hundreds of thousands of dollars through cable customers’ bills to put public-interest, educational and government, or PEG, programming on the air.

But a franchise agreement with Comcast expires in two years, when the county will become subject to new federal funding restrictions in how it can spend PEG funds. With an annual budget of about \$1.1 million, PEG fees account for 85 percent of CTV’s operating costs, but in 2014 those funds can no longer be used to pay for anything but equipment.

To survive, CTV has to find a way to move forward with drastically limited operational funds. That means funding for crews that film local arts awards, high school football games, band competitions, lectures, poetry readings, political candidate interviews and more are in serious jeopardy.

“The emphasis would change from being a service provider to being an equipment provider,” said CTV board member Keith Gudger, who said coverage of community events will be missed. “That’s, I think, a huge service in the

county. ... We’d like to see that continue, but I don’t see how we can do it.”

MERGER WITH GILROY?

The board is exploring a potential merger with the Gilroy-based Community Media Access Partnership, which already has undergone similar changes and pieces together operations using everything from grants to AmeriCorps volunteers.

Community Media Access Partnership is headed by Kathy Bisbee, a former Cruzio marketing director (and, briefly, a Community TV staffer) who has steered Community Media Access Partnership through the same stormy seas. The group has expanded its offerings, even recently starting commercial in-house productions for local businesses and nonprofits, and providing digital literacy and job training programs to local school districts.

“We’re not ‘Wayne’s World’ anymore,” Bisbee said in reference to the movie and the “Saturday Night Live” sketch featuring Mike Myers and Dana Carvey. Bisbee explained that public-access television is now a low-cost way for community members to develop professional audio-visual skills. That it involves small fees is part of the new reality, and more than half of Community Media Access Partnership’s budget now comes from sources other than PEG or franchise fees.

Access Monterey Peninsula, Monterey’s public access nonprofit, may also be part of the merger, Bisbee said. But for that to happen, Santa Cruz’s CTV is undertaking a closely watched vote of CTV’s 300 community members, asking them to relinquish their voting rights.

MAJORITY RULES

To do that, CTV’s board has to get those members — a loose collection of artists and enthusiasts who paid an annual \$25 fee and ended up with a proverbial seat at the table — to actually vote. Furthermore, a majority of members must vote affirmatively to change the membership structure, a participation level that is rare, board members say.

“I’m kind of against this election,” said Leigh, producer of Santa Cruz Super Stars. “The fact that they want to take away all of our voting rights scares me

the most.”

The vote is seen as a prerequisite for any merger, though it does not finalize one. If it fails, the alternative is unclear.

Kevin Bowling, who heads the county technology department, says he may be forced to issue a request for proposals to run the three cable-access channels. In other words, CTV would probably disappear, replaced by a new nonprofit.

“I don’t want to do that. The Board (of Supervisors) doesn’t want to do that. We want CTV to find a way forward,” Bowling said.

The county and city have clearly telegraphed a desire to see CTV continue in some capacity. Bisbee, who also serves on the board of the national Alliance for Community Media, said dozens of other California public-access nonprofits have not survived similar changes.

AFTER THE VOTE

Not all board members think the general membership vote — which is ongoing and ends June 25 — is make-or-break. CTV board member James Fisher said the nonprofit could go it alone, exploring more partnerships and looking for more revenue streams, such as charging fees for covering community events.

Fisher also said Community TV could benefit from moving to either downtown’s Cruzio building or the new Tannery Arts Center. Its lease, which costs more than \$100,000 annually, is covered by the county through PEG fees.

“I do know that the vote is not the end of the world on this program,” Fisher said. “But certainly we are doing this vote on good faith.”

Meanwhile, Community TV’s executive director has been sidelined, taking a medical leave. As concerns about the nonprofit’s future grow, Community TV is looking for an interim executive director, possibly to serve only until a merger goes through.

If it does, a merged Community Media Access Partnership and Community TV (and, possibly, Access Monterey Peninsula) would be overseen by a single board, with advisory boards serving in each of the former nonprofits’ service areas.

Follow Sentinel reporter Jason Hoppin on Twitter @scnewsdude