

Community TV faces tough road ahead

Communications

Supervisors reject two-year contract for one-year deal

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SANTA CRUZ — Community TV's lifelines are getting shorter.

In another fork in the road for the financially troubled public-access nonprofit, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors gave the organization only a one-year contract to con-

tinue to offer public educational and government programming.

That move was the least binding of several options on the table, extending CTV's deal only through the expected 2014 disappearance of operational funds that had been provided by local cable franchise operators.

"Public access in the U.S. has an incredibly difficult business model to move forward with," said county Information Services Director Kevin Bowling, who has been working on the issue for more than a year.

"I don't believe it's fiscally prudent to

(spend) reserves at a point where we don't know what's really going to happen," Supervisor Zach Friend said.

Both CTV and Gilroy-based Community Media Access Partnership, which has a partnership agreement with CTV to reshape the organization, sought a two-year deal.

"I do think that it's really going to take us two years to turn this around," said Kathy Bisbee, Community Media Access Partnership's executive director.

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Beginning next year, CTV faces new restrictions on \$500,000 in franchise fees that translates into a loss of most of its operating budget. CTV's board, Bisbee and Lynn Miller, interim executive director, are all looking at ways to reshape the organization, from fundraising to commercial operations to a new home.

Miller told the board he'd made tough decisions on CTV's budget, with longtime staffers facing layoffs or reduced hours. He is expected to stay on through August, at which point Bisbee would take over.

"We have made efforts to bring the budget into alignment," Miller said.

But prospects for moving Community TV to the Tannery Arts Building seem to be dimming. The county has

opened up talks with Cabrillo College about moving the operation there, a potential move the board wanted explored.

"A model that involves the education of young people into the field, and leverages not just the students but the faculty at Cabrillo, is a way to stretch the dollars," Supervisor John Leopold said.

The board did approve the \$150,000 purchase of a new media server, which can automate programming across Community TV's three public access channels. However, the server would remain in the basement of the County Governmental Center, and be available to the county or any CTV successor.

The pressures facing Community TV are not unique, as operational funds across the country dried up after new FCC rules. A 2011 Congressional report found more than 100 public-access operations had disappeared nationwide since 2005, and it forecast

more casualties.

In other business, the county heard a proposal to merge the functions of the county treasurer-tax collector and auditor-controller. Current Treasurer Fred Keeley won't seek re-election next year, and has endorsed the move.

Many duties of the treasurer-tax collector have become automated over the years, with full-time staff having shrunk from 40 to 13. The move would save at least Keeley's \$176,000 salary, though further savings are yet to be determined.

It is likely that deputies would oversee the functions of each office, with each reporting separately to an elected auditor-controller.

Current Auditor-Controller Mary Jo Walker confirmed Tuesday she would run for the combined office.

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