

PUBLIC AIRWAVES

CommunityTV throws lifeline, Romney Dunbar picks it up

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Popular TV figure may get involved in turnaround effort

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SANTA CRUZ—The latest trial balloon for rescuing CommunityTV's finances is carrying a familiar face — television personality Romney Dunbar.

The former local news anchor is in talks with the beleaguered local public-access channel on a possible public-private partnership to help solve CommunityTV's funding puzzle. The Santa Cruz-based operation has a year before a federal rule change kicks in that eviscerates much of its operating funds.

"It is very provocative to look at (public access programming) in a new way," Dunbar said. "It was nice to be asked after 30 years in town and being in and out of media. I sort of got excited about it."

Dunbar runs a local video production company, Dunbar Productions, which would partner with CommunityTV to produce noncommercial programming — say, surfing documentaries or a profile of the work done by local nonprofits.

Those shows could be underwritten by sponsors, with Dunbar and CommunityTV splitting the proceeds. Dunbar would gain access to CommunityTV's three channels, online streaming capabilities and equipment.

Acting CommunityTV Executive Director Lynn Miller said the idea has potential, but is just one piece of finding a sustainable financial model. The group is set to hand over day-to-day management to Gilroy-based Community Media Access Partnership and is exploring a move to Cabrillo College.



DUNBAR

"From our perspective it's now a three-pronged approach to manage CTV," Miller said, "We're in the very, very early stages of talking to him."

Until 2002, Dunbar was a news anchor at several local TV stations, including KSBW, KION and KMST. He then struck out on his own, producing the popular "Travels with Romney" show.

CommunityTV is largely funded through franchise fees from local cable operators. But those funds — about \$750,000 — will soon be restricted to capital purchases only, leaving the group to scramble for money to pay personnel to run the station. It has slashed spending more than 20 percent, including layoffs and reduced hours for employees.

Dunbar said he hopes the

local experiment evolves into a model for other communities trying to save their local public-access resources. In recent years, more than 100 stations have closed nationwide due to lost funding.

"I'm a guinea pig. It's not about the Romney channel. We want to see if I can provoke more of this," Dunbar said. "If I can do it right, then we can build a model that other productions can use, and other groups can use, so that these channels are still open to the community."

Dunbar said he is still "looking for a rate card" — trying to figure how much the programming is worth. He sketched out a few preliminary ideas to the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, but the potential partnership is in its exploratory stages.

One county board member cautioned that he doesn't want to see local channels, which are set aside for public, educational and government programming, become commercial ventures.

"I don't want CommunityTV to turn into the hotel channel," Supervisor John Leopold said.

CommunityTV Board President Keith Gudger said he is optimistic about the future, noting that CMAP's Executive Director Kathy Bisbee, who would run CTV

on July 1, has experience partnering with outside content producers. He also said Dunbar could be the first of many to come aboard.

"We really haven't put effort into underwriting before, and that's something we clearly need to do," Gudger said.

County Chief Administrative Office Susan Mauriello said she sees potential in the idea, and hopes it could help fix CommunityTV's finances.

"We don't have any other alternatives," Mauriello said.

Community TV is in the middle of a fundraising drive, and will hold a telethon June 26 and June 27 from 6-9 p.m. The channels will have live, local entertainment, prize giveaways and phone banks, with local personalities emceeing.

Miller, who came aboard to help steer CommunityTV's painful transition, will depart in August. He said he wants to hire a development coordinator to help raise money by July 1, and is focused on moving the operation to Cabrillo, which recently hired a new president.

"We have money for a physical plant and they have money for staffing," Miller said. "It also gives us a broader appeal to the total community. We're down on Pacific (Avenue) and while there's nothing wrong with that, Cabrillo gives us the countywide exposure."