

# Baiting the hook

## Politicos angle for cable exposure as cheap movies lure subscribers

By TIM RICHARD

To local politicians, cable television means a chance for image building and "good PR."

To the bulk of customers, it means bringing in "R" rated movies — cheap.

But one thing cable TV is unlikely to mean — lots of

revenue for local government. In fact, it could even be costly.

Those views were voiced by two experts who spoke Friday before several dozen public officials in a meeting sponsored by state Rep. Richard Fessler, R-West Bloomfield. Virtually every suburb in Wayne and Oakland counties is pondering a cable TV franchise.

CITIES AND townships granting franchises to cable TV companies expect to get 3 percent or so of the gross.

"It really doesn't amount to that much," said Dr. Charles Ruffing, retired supervisor of technology for the Michigan Department of Education.

For Meridian Township, the Lansing suburb with which he's familiar, cable TV earned the township \$14,000 annually on the basis of 4,000 subscribing households, he said.

The revenue is turned over to a cable TV commission to buy equipment for local broadcasting and doesn't do much to supplement governmental services, he said. "But it's a helluva tremendous public relations tool," Ruffing said. "It cleans up their (governmental meetings) act. And it helps with millage elections."

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— Dr. Charles Ruffing, MSU



**THE BIG REASON** for the explosion of interest in cable TV in suburbia, said Dr. Tom Baldwin, is "uncut movies."

Baldwin, professor of telecommunications at Michigan State University, said customers for movies "are not those who go to movie theaters," adding there is "a pretty good appetite for R movies. That's an issue in many communities."

Baldwin said about 40 percent of the films shown on cable TV are R rated (usually some nudity and rough language), a slightly lesser proportion are PG (usually some rough language), and 16 percent are G (all right for young children). Only a small handful are rated X (explicit sex).

For \$1 many parents can and do buy a lockout device so that children can't turn on objectionable movies.

**CABLE TV** is operated by private companies which set up receiving facilities in a community and pipe offerings to houses and institutions by cables strung on utility poles in public rights-of-way.

Because public rights-of-way are used, local government must grant a franchise.

There are several "tiers" of service — conventional channels, public service channels, with local news and governmental meetings that aren't carried by metropoli-

tan commercial TV; a variety of national channels with movies, sports, ethnic, religious and children's programs; movies and text services such as weather, financial and shopping guides.

There are even two-way systems. For example, said Baldwin, a home security system could use a channel to transmit burglar alarm or fire signals from a home to the public safety desk of the city.

Utility meters could be read the same way. Even political polling can be done, though it wouldn't be a good cross-section of the public statistically.

Two-way television, however, is expensive to wire and expensive to install, he said.

**TO EDUCATORS** and politicians looking forward to reaching constituents at home, Ruffing had a warning:

"It costs a helluva lot to put on a TV program. For every one person on camera, there's six behind the camera, and they have to be paid."

That was why, he said, Meridian Township plows back all its franchise fee revenues into the local system.

He advised communities to set up study committees that will put in six months of work before the governing body grants a franchise.

"You can't pull the study committee off the street," he said. "You need legal talent. Engineering. Financial. A cross-section of the town — schools, civic clubs, library, police department, fire department."

He also advised spending some money on staff and a travel budget to see what other communities across the country have done.

## Car license registration due March 31

Everyone who owns a motor vehicle must register that vehicle by March 31, 1980 if it is going to be legally driven on public highways after that date, according to Secretary of State Richard H. Austin.

The statement came on the heels of a rash of recent inquiries to Secretary of State branch offices indicating some confusion

over the March 31st deadline.

According to Austin, this year the Department of State is phasing in a new system of vehicle registration based on birthdate. Under this system, plates and tabs will expire each on the vehicle owner's birthday.

To make the transition to the birthday system, the 1980 registration will be valid until

the owner's next birthday. From then on, the plate or plate tabs will expire each year on the owner's next birthday.

Some individual owners mistakenly assume they can wait until their birthday in 1980 to buy plates. This is a mistaken impression and all owners still must purchase their 1980 license plate tabs by the traditional March 31st deadline, Austin said.

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