Tri-City Producers Alliance wants to ensure access

BY DIANE GALE ANDREASSI
SPECIAL WRITER

Outdated cable television equipment used for local programming is central in a debate between a newly formed group and cable officials.

The Time Warner franchise under which cable is provided to Farmington, Farmington Hills and Novi expired in 1997; however, the contract has been extended.

Community access is just one issue involved in negotiations between Time Warner and Southwestern Oakland Cable Commission, a community cable representative for the three cities.

"We have the Time Warner studio, SWOCC studio and a mobile van," said Mark Adler, a Novi resident and past member of the Cable Access Committee, an advisory group that reports to SWOCC.

"The Time Warner studio and mobile van are over 15 years old and are Jurassic by every standard – failing by everyone who is using it," Adler said. "The SWOCC studio is a little newer, but on its way out. People don't want to use old equipment. They have better equipment in their own living rooms."

Adler recently spearheaded a new group of seven Farmington Hills and Novi residents, called the Tri-City Producers Alliance, and their mission is to make sure community access programming remains alive and well. Tri-City Producers Alliance and supporters will attend the next SWOCC meeting at 4:30 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 17, at the Farmington City Hall and they invite anyone interested in cable community access to attend.

Tri-City Producers Alliance believes community access will flounder if Time Warner doesn't commit now to provide enough money for new equipment, Adler said. A basic freedom of speech and a viable means of communication will be diminished, he said, if people shy away from producing alternative shows and airing their opinions.

"The community access television is the only place in the country that an individual can create a program on issues that are edgy, unusual and air them without fear that they will be edited," Adler said. "They can make a half- hour television show on anything that they want and you can't do that in your newspaper or anywhere else and that's the essence of what we stand to lose. It can be diminished if equipment isn't upgraded."

While cable officials acknowledge that the equipment used to film community access shows is old, they say that local programming has a secure future.

"Community access will be no less than it is now and it will be much better at the end of the negotiations," said Hugh Crawford, SWOCC commissioner.

"Community access is not going to go away," Crawford said. "We're aware of the condition of the equipment and facilities and all of those issues. And we've been negotiating for a long period of time. There's only a few of us who have information about the negotiations and anyone who speaks without the details may not have all the facts."

Tom Bjorklund, Time Warner regional manager, confirmed that funding for community access equipment is a negotiating point. However, he wouldn't elaborate.

"We've agreed with SWOCC that we'd have confidential renewal discussions and I'd assume not getting into the details about what we're talking about," Bjorklund said. "We think that community programming is one of the many positive things about cable television and we look forward to its continued success in Farmington, Farmington Hills and Novi."

Meanwhile, Tri-City Producers is organizing a mentoring program for people interested in producing community access shows.

"The group will foster community access by meeting monthly and having a place where people can come and find out what is going on," Adler said.

"Unfortunately, hundreds of people are trained in the community, but they don't know how to make it work," Adler added. "Now these people will have a place to come and get involved and talk back to their TV. Community access producers are quiet and we are trying to get them vocal. We are trying to save Channel 12."

Membership in Tri-City Producers includes Adler, Albert Rosen, Frank Bemish, Theron Walker, Carol Bauer and Flynt Hind of Farmington Hills and *Chuck Cook of Novi, Adler said.*

OBITUARIES

RUSSELL E. GREGG

Russell E. Gregg, 36, of Farmington Hills died Nov. 7.

Mr. Gregg was a graduate of Stevenson High School and Harvard University.

He is survived by his mother, Carol; and two brothers.

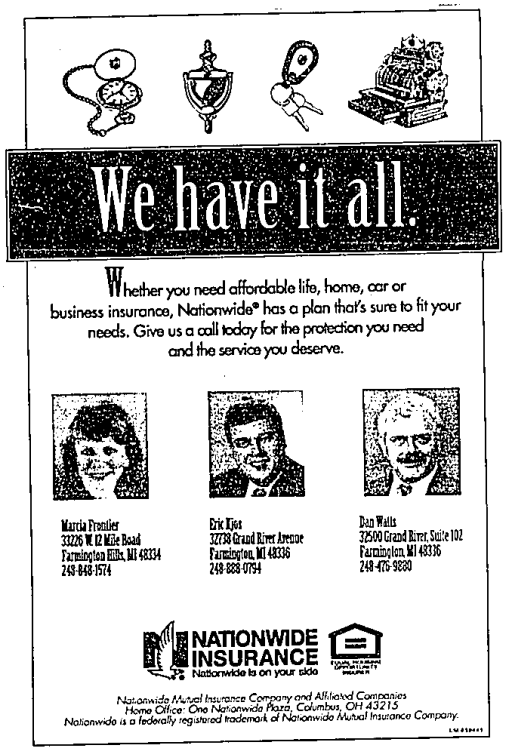
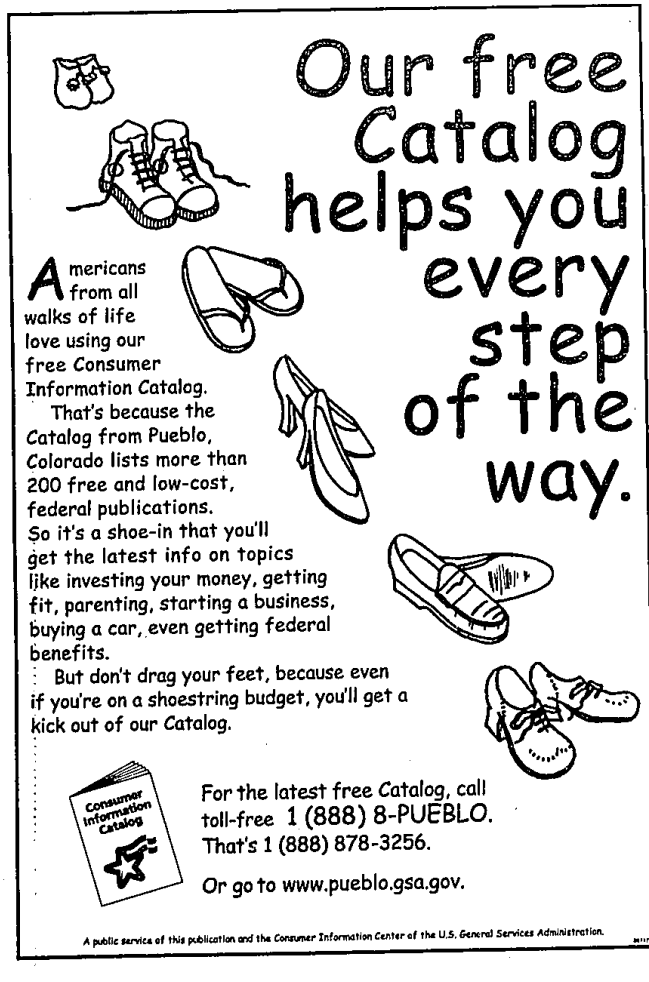
A memorial service was held Nov. 12 at Fred Wood Funeral Home in Livonia.

Memorial contributions may be sent to the Alliance for the Mentally Ill.

VIRGINIA C. TERRY

Virginia C. Terry, 76, of Farmington Hills, died Nov. 12, at Botsford Hospital in Farmington Hills.

She is survived by husband, Clifford; son, Clifford (Cathy); daughter, Penny (Lynden) Oglesby; sisters, Ruth Ahrens and Mary Utley; three grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

Funeral services will be held at 7 p.m. today, Nov. 15, at Heeney-Sundquist Funeral Home in Farmington with the Rev. Dr. Carl Leth officiating. Visitation will be held before the funeral from 2-7 p.m.

Memorial contributions can be sent to the Leukemia Society of America.