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Montgomery to consider funding for news website

Proposal includes submitted articles, photos online

by Erin Cunningham, Staff Writer

Montgomery County's crowded media market could be welcoming a new government-funded news website by next year.

Plans are under way to launch a website with user-generated content — either called MoCo Daily or MoCo Post — which would enable people to submit blogs, photographs or articles to be posted online, said Merlyn Reineke, executive director of Montgomery Community Media, which operates the two public access cable channels in the county.

Reineke said the cost of the venture is not known, but Councilman Hans Riemer (D-At large) of Silver Spring said he's been told a request of about \$250,000 will be made to fund it. It is expected that some of that money will pay for staff needed to operate the site.

However, budget shortfalls in recent years have caused the Montgomery Council to transfer money from the county's cable fund to pay for other government programs — and officials expect to do so again next year.

In fiscal 2010, \$8.9 million was removed from the cable fund, and in fiscal 2011, about \$8.7 million was transferred. Officials estimate that another \$8 million from the Cable Communications Plan will be used to fund other government expenses this year.

The county's \$24 million Cable Communications Plan is funded through grants and franchise fees charged to the county's three cable providers, Comcast, Verizon and RCN. The cable fund is not supported by taxpayers.

There are some restrictions on how the money in the cable fund can be spent, but council members said they are able to transfer the funds.

To make up for the losses, the county has eliminated some closed captioning for programs, such as the Homework Hotline, and cut some youth programming, said Mitsuko Herrera, cable and broadband administrator for the county.

On Monday, Councilwoman Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) of Silver Spring said she predicts the cable fund money will have to be used to make up for a shortfall in the county's operating budget again in fiscal 2013, which begins July 1.

"I'm sure we're going to face another horrible year," she said. "I assume we're going to be strapped for money at this point."

In addition to other functions, the cable fund pays for programming on government cable channels. The county's cable fund pays for channels for county government, the cities of Rockville, Takoma Park and Gaithersburg, the Maryland Municipal League and Montgomery College. Montgomery County Public Schools also has two dedicated channels, and two channels are for community access.

Herrera said that if the cable fund's budget is raided again next year, the county will be unable to move forward on a number of initiatives, such as increased Wi-Fi access or the planned MoCo Post/MoCo Daily.

Reineke said the news site would publish content from "citizen journalists and county contributors," which he said would include elected officials and government public relations employees.

"Anyone can contribute content," he said.

That content would be vetted by small core of county employees, according to Reineke.

"There's going to need to be some presence at Montgomery Community Media of individuals who would have to quarterback that activity," he said.

Riemer said it might be necessary to reconfigure the way the government approaches its cable programming. He supports the cable channels live coverage of council sessions and committee meetings — similar to C-Span coverage — which he said is a function of transparent government.

"The question we have going forward is whether we're going to break ground in new ways by spending more or by changing how we spend the money that is already budgeted," he said.

Riemer said he is unsure if the county's idea for a news site is a good one.

"My basic concern is that nobody will use it," he said.

Navarro also questioned whether some of the current television programming is the best use of the cable fund.

She said she recently saw programming on a public access channel about African music that she believed was inappropriate.

"It was hip-hop African beats that should have been shown on MTV at 2 a.m.," Navarro said.