

Criticism misplaced on pace of approving cable contract

Any transfer of this county's cable television franchise must put cable customers first. That's why The Gazette's editorial urging a rushed judgment by the County Council on a contract negotiated with Comcast was wrongheaded ("We want our Comcast cable," June 30).

One of this council's primary responsibilities is oversight of county contracts. Just in the last year, we fixed a proposed mixed-paper recycling contract sent over by the county executive and in the process saved county taxpayers up to \$6 million over the course of the deal. The council also was able to work out an improved cable franchise contract with Starpower that boosted the areas the company was required to cover from 59 percent to 90 percent of the county.

Three points:

• Any company, no matter how good, is going to experience troubles with cable upgrades. The Baltimore Sun editorially blasted Comcast's poor service in Baltimore County, and the Detroit Free Press reported that the Comcast operation there repeatedly failed to meet federal performance guidelines. A new company is no panacea. That's why we need a contract with real penalties for poor customer service.

• Assuring open access for all Internet players to use Comcast lines, for a price, means more competition. Court rulings against requiring open access as a condition of cable system transfers in the Pacific Northwest don't mean a thing here. Ultimately, the Federal Communications Com-

mission should step in to decide this. In the meantime, we should push for more competition, not less.

• It took the county executive's office 133 days from when Comcast filed its application last November to when the council received the proposed contract. By the time council voted to approve Comcast's bid on July 11, the council had the contract 103 days — 48 days of which overlapped with intensive council work on the budget when we were not able to consider the cable contract.

Why then, did The Gazette not criticize the county executive for holding onto the proposed contract a full month longer than the council would have had it? Somebody's playing politics all right — The Gazette.

This council wanted to approve a trans-

fer that put cable customers first. Despite hundreds of complaints under the current franchisee, the county has not levied even one cent in penalties. The woeful enforcement of the current cable franchise meant we could not simply approve the franchise transfer and hope for the best.

The vast majority of those who testified at our public hearing on the transfer raised legitimate concerns. It was our job to approve a contract that answered those concerns.

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