

# Access head explains changes in cable laws

## Local cable TV station needs other sources of funding

By **DAVID CLOUSTON**

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State lawmakers hoped that by easing the way for telephone companies such as AT&T to offer television service, it might give cable television and satellite providers more competition and an incentive to lower customers' bills.

But the fixed costs charged by TV networks — led by sports giant ESPN — mean that no matter how many providers are competing for a certain market, their prices won't dramatically differ, Salina Community Access Televi-

sion executive director David Hawksworth said Tuesday.

Hawksworth made the comment after he spoke at a Salina League of Women Voters at the Salina Public Library.

And it could be years before that competition, likely from AT&T, is offered in Salina, enabling Salina customers to bundle their phone, cable and Internet service the way Cox customers can now, he said.

Access Television, meanwhile, is scrambling to regain funding that Kansas' new law on franchise fees did away with. The law passed last year also gives Cox Communications, Salina's cable provider, authority to start charging for services it formerly provided for free, as required under its franchise agree-

ment with the city.

Hawksworth said an article he saw published recently about cable customers in Montgomery County, Maryland, near Washington, D.C., noted that they were served by three cable television providers. One recently raised rates 4 percent, one by 6 percent and one by 15 percent.

"To me, it's pretty evident that even though you have competition and a number of providers providing cable service in a specific area, it doesn't do anything to lower rates. That's just my experience," he said.

About a dozen listeners heard Hawksworth and Access' development director, Betty Martin-Spessard, discuss its revenue prospects

and fundraising plans. The agency's franchise agreement with the city expires April 3.

"We teach people how to produce television programming and how to use television production equipment so they can get messages out to the citizens in an unfettered manner," Hawksworth told his audience.

Just eight employees work at Access, six full time and two part time.

Three channels devoted to Access on Salina's cable television system show programming such as broadcasts of city, county and Salina School Board meetings, local concerts and events, and educational and local sports programming. The new law requires just two channels be shown.

In 2006, it was an all-time high for activity at Access. One-hundred and seven people produced 1,022 programs to be shown, Hawksworth said.

For the time being, Cox has said it will continue offering three channels, but that could change if another competitor moves into the market and offers two channels, Hawksworth said.

Also under the current franchise agreement, Cox provides at no cost, a dedicated fiberoptic line and equipment for Access to transmit its programs onto the cable system. The new law makes that a responsibility of the municipality — Cox could charge for the service, amounting to thousands of dollars annually, Hawksworth said.

By far, the biggest loss Comes with the loss of a franchise fee collected by Cox to support Access, which totals nearly \$150,000, or about 40 percent of the agency's annual revenue, he said.

In the past, only 4 percent of Access' budget has come from fundraisers, grants, donations and underwriting, Martin-Spessard said. The agency wants to increase that to 45 percent, she said.

One event the agency has scheduled is Oct. 20 at the Salina Country Club, featuring dinner, bingo and a live auction.

Business underwriters will be sought. There will be underwriting opportunities ranging from \$250 to \$5,000, she said.