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Hermosa Beach News

City may look at webcasting meetings

By Chris Yang

Though Hermosa Beach was quick to embrace the Internet by offering free Wi-Fi access, the city has been slow to broadcast its meetings via the Web.

Also known as streaming video or webcasting, the service has quickly become the norm in governments at the state, federal and local levels. Just recently, the California Coastal Commission jumped on the bandwagon and broadcast one of its meetings on the Internet, the first time it has done so in the agency's 30-year history. Among local municipalities, five cities currently provide streaming video services to their residents - Carson, El Segundo, Manhattan Beach, Torrance and Rancho Palos Verdes.

"I'm very interested in doing that," said Councilman J.R. Reviczky, of broadcasting meetings online. "I like what Torrance did." He added that the item will appear on a future agenda, most likely sometime after May.

"Next year's budget," he said. "There's no money in the budget for it this year. I'm going to prepare it for the budget (after the fiscal year ends)."

Reviczky described the current process of weeding through videotapes of old meetings as "cumbersome" and likes the idea of watching one particular item, which is possible online. "You can just go to the item in the agenda," he said.

To broadcast municipal meetings on the Internet, most cities and agencies contract with outside companies. In doing so, the companies providing such a service would, depending on the situation, host the data, perform the live streaming video of meetings and manage the archival of past meetings. Though the benefits of such a service are quite apparent, the service is not inexpensive. Costs for a city looking to broadcast meetings could run as high as \$24,000 per year, depending on how many meetings were broadcast each year.

Another alternative for cities contemplating such a decision would be to hire people to perform the work in-house. Of the cities currently incorporating streaming video content on their Web sites, each hired the San Francisco-based firm Granicus to webcast their meetings except for the city of Rancho Palos Verdes. It was able to provide its service through the city's relationship with a nonprofit organization known as Palos Verdes on the Net. PVNet subsidized some of the cost and provided most of the necessary equipment, allowing RPV to provide its residents with a similar service for roughly \$9,000 per year. Though a decision to implement a streaming video system in-house would require technical expertise, the move could very well lead to significant cost savings should local officials undertake such an enterprise.

"It really depends on what you've got to start with," said PVNet Director Ted Vegvari. He then listed some of the requirements of implementing a streaming video system without hiring an outside company.

"What are you going to store all the video on? Videos take a lot of disk space. If a city decided it

was going to take it on, the city would have to set up a server that would store all the video content," he said. "You need to have an Internet service. You have to have streaming video software setup on the server. You need a workstation for digitizing the video content to get it on the video server, and to do some minor editing of the content."

In addition to whether to hire an outside company to implement the system and the cost of doing so, another factor that might affect any decision to broadcast meetings online is the city's young Wi-Fi system.

"Wi-Fi has limited bandwidth," said Vegvari. "If you, all of a sudden, start broadcasting over the Wi-Fi, this could triple or quadruple your bandwidth requirements real fast."

But instead of seeing this as an impediment to undertaking a citywide streaming video system, Vegvari viewed it as a reason to consider upgrading the existing Wi-Fi system, a proposal that stalled two years ago due to a lack of support on the City Council.

Reviczky would not be alone in supporting a move to broadcast meetings online. Jim Lissner, a well-known Hermosa Beach advocate of open government, famously raised the ire of some members of the School Board after he began videotaping board meetings for broadcast on the local cable access channel.

"I've been asking them to do that for a long time," said Lissner. "I've mentioned it a number of times. We have staff members and business members who want to follow something in town."