

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Galesburgers fall for big business rip-off

You realize, of course, that the telecommunications referendum on April 3rd does not involve any tax money and Galesburg citizens should not have to be consulted at all about the expenditure of 12.5 million dollars. Private investors will bear the cost and risk by way of tax-exempt Revenue Bonds issued by the city. The City will also investigate other funding sources, such as grants and loans from the State of Illinois. The revenue would be generated by cable service fees and leasing of unused lines.

We have to have a referendum only because AT & T and other large corporations lobbied the Illinois state legislature to pass a law so they wouldn't have competition. And some Galesburgers are actually falling for it hook, line and sinker.

I hasten to add that our State Senator Carl Hawkinson and State Representative Donald Moffitt voted against this law. Good for them.

The city of Galesburg would like to build a state-of-the-art-Internet/Cable TV system throughout Galesburg, and if you think we need to attract new business, meet our educational and community needs of this next century, you'd better support it. It's much like the Galesburg water system developed by forward-thinking city officials in the 1950s. We have been a model of planning for our water resources. Of course, if Alderman Tony Gerk had been around then, we'd still have wells in our back yards and horses carting water trucks to fires.

Not understanding the value of such a system is no excuse. If you don't understand it, just vote "yes," because the people who do are all for it.

After hearing Dan Alcorn, a Cable Commission member for five years and chairman of the Telecommunications commission for two and a half, 39 of 40 members of the Knox County Democrat organization voted last Tuesday night to support the referendum. It was the first time many of us really understood the issue. The audience included people aged 18 to 80 of diverse backgrounds and occupations, as well as Mayor Bob Sheehan and Jan Occhi, a member of the commission.

The system would provide better cable service at lower prices, although residents would still have a choice of cable companies. Are we afraid of competition? When we consider just the cable aspect of the new system, have the current cable companies kept their promises of investment in Galesburg? Is Galesburg AT & T's top priority? I think not.

The system could provide better emergency services. Mr. Alcorn mentioned the chemical spill on the Interstate several weeks ago, when residents had to be notified to evacuate. The message was on television. What if the television wasn't on? Alcorn said with improved technology "reverse 911" could be employed, when all Galesburg residents could be notified immediately in case of emergency.

In a preliminary business plan prepared by John Guiste, Human Resource Coordinator/Risk Manager for the city, Guiste says, "A sound telecommunications infrastructure can bring into a community like Galesburg new economic growth and life. Industry and business are making decisions to relocate in communities that offer them direct fiber optic links, which allows them to transmit data at the highest speed. —Organizations will not relocate to an area that does not offer the ability to video conference or use video telephony."

The report continues, "A community-owned communications utility creates the opportunity to serve widespread community needs and to provide services

that might not currently be available or cost-effective if obtained from private enterprise."

Guiste points out that our current cable provider's gross quarterly revenue is about \$1,200,000. This money is passed on to enhance their larger systems which make more money for the company. In other words, it goes out of Galesburg. With the citizens and city owning the utility, revenue would remain here to enhance our system and once the bonds are paid, could be used for the city's streets, sidewalks, parks, etc.

Relax. The city Council is not going to be running the new telecommunications system. The plans are to either hire or appoint a communications manager with background in the cable industry. This one person, not a committee, will be responsible for implementing the project, from

construction to finish. A technical team will also be hired, including a technical supervisor and field communications technicians. The recommended training is extensive.

A Channel Selection Committee will be formed to select the number and type of channels to be aired. The Mayor will appoint committee members with approval from the City Council. The committee will meet twice a year to review the programming being offered and to change or select new channels for the coming year. The committee would consist of five citizens and one city representative.

Our world is changing. With the closure of Briggs Manufacturing and manufacturing plant lay-offs, we have become an area of unskilled and unemployed workers who must learn new

technology. This system can help all of us prepare for different jobs and directions through enhancement of our educational institutions.

I think this is an exciting idea and opportunity for Galesburg citizens. I plan to put my money where my mouth is and invest in this project.

On the referendum "to acquire, construct, own and operate a community antenna television system, including a community broad band telecommunication infrastructure" for Galesburg, please vote YES on April 3. Let's have the guts to have our community be on the cutting edge of technology and be prepared for the future.

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