

RFI/C
Questions for Interested Parties
Including Prospective Channel Operators

The San Francisco Community Television Corporation, which does business as Access San Francisco, is pleased to provide this response to the City's Request for Information. Based on our track record as San Francisco's provider of public access services, our participation in the national community media field, and our history launching and managing the City's government access channel, we are confident in our ability to provide high quality services in the future.

Our vision as San Francisco's public access manager is to serve as:

- The voice of San Francisco, featuring unique local content on cable and the web including politics, culture, the arts, and a broad range of social issues.
- A network of community organizations empowered to make strategic use of electronic media tools to reach and communicate with their constituencies.
- A community of producers and volunteers working to showcase and connect San Francisco's diverse communities through media.
- A hub for noncommercial media production with facilities, equipment and training that is accessible and affordable to all San Franciscans.
- An advocate for freedom of expression and diversity of voice within the public media system.

Our responses to the Request for Information questions follow, and we look forward to providing a proposal this fall in response to the City's formal Request for Proposal.

1. San Francisco is committed to encouraging free speech, the right to express alternative viewpoints, localism and community activism. Democracy works best when a wide variety of voices and opinions can be seen and heard. How should the City redefine the role and scope of public access in San Francisco to best meet these goals?

Access SF strives to execute on the mandate of public access for the San Francisco community. In our view, this mandate is to (1) provide the community with the tools of media production, along with training in using these tools; (2) enable the community to exercise its free speech; (3) provide a platform for the community to express alternative viewpoints that may not otherwise be heard; and (4) strengthen localism and community activism. These core goals form the fundamental mandate of Access SF, and we will continue to fulfill this mandate to the best of our ability and to the extent possible while optimizing on all of the resources available to us.

Although community communication tools evolve over time, the public access mission remains constant and should not be redefined.

Are there any alternative operating models available that would continue to meet the City's public access goals at a reduced cost compared to the current arrangement? If so, please describe these models in detail, including estimated cost savings. If innovative models have been successfully implemented in other cities, please provide references.

Access SF is always open to innovation in serving the public access needs of the San Francisco community. San Francisco has the largest number of non-profits per square foot in the nation, and a diverse and vibrant civic culture that cuts across multiple social, political and economic realities. These aspects of San Francisco make it doubly imperative that an affordable media outlet is available across all socio-economic segments of the community.

However, reduced costs generally mean reductions in the scope and/or quality of public access services, and Access SF's operation is already operating at a less than optimal level for a City the size and diversity of San Francisco. As a result, we are continually reviewing a number of alternative operating models, with a goal of improving and maximizing our services given our current budget constraints.

We are aware of models where public access is operated by volunteers and a minimal level of (underpaid) staff and have seen how these strategies jeopardize the basic quality of public access in those areas, for a number of different reasons.

We are aware of a situation where access users are charged high fees for every service provided, including channel time and facility usage. We feel that this provides access only for the rich, which again goes against the ideal of public access for the entire San Francisco community, across all socio-economic barriers.

Also, we are aware of a model where public access has become a professional production house with well-paid staff where staff typically spends their time producing commercial content for corporate interests rather than public or community interests.

The public access operation in St. Paul has been highlighted by DTIS as a positive example of an alternative operating model. While we agree that St. Paul is a positive model, it must be noted that St. Paul's million-dollar budget comes mainly from cable-related funding and is supplemented and expanded by funding from programs like Americorp Vista. These supplemental funds do not replace cable-related operational funding and they only add about 7% to cover overhead costs of the St. Paul public access facility. They do not fund core functions.

Access SF is aware of one model that could result in cost savings, which would involve combining Public and Government access operations. This model is more efficient than separate P & G operations and can reduce costs by consolidating functions such as management, engineering, equipment maintenance and acquisition, and shared production resources. Access SF did manage the government channel for 6 & 1/2 years at far less cost than the government is currently spending. Consolidating the P & G channels could result in savings as well as provide additional support on the public access side. There are numerous examples of nonprofits managing combined P&E&G or P&G channels.

In summary, to date, our findings have strongly indicated that the bulk of alternative operating models risk distorting our mission: to provide grassroots media access to the local community in a manner that is not cost prohibitive and enables the entire community to participate. However we do feel that combining public and government access channel management could reduce costs and is worthy of additional exploration.

2. What potential collaborative partnerships may be developed between the public access channel operator and other community organizations, nonprofit organizations and local business entities?

Access SF believes strongly in the power of partnerships as part of a vibrant public access practice. Through our nonprofit organization membership program, we have partnerships with more than 50 San Francisco nonprofits and community-based organizations including Craigslist, the League of Women Voters of San Francisco, Chalk, the SFUSD, ARC of San Francisco to name a few. Access SF also has partnerships with several government agencies including the Mayor's Office, the Department of Public Health and the Department on Aging and Disabilities. We have also partnered with the SomArts Community Center, the Art Institute of California and the African American Art and Culture Complex.

Public access is also an important tool for the disabled, elderly, and other underrepresented constituents of the San Francisco community. As a result, we view partnerships with public and private entities representing the interests of underrepresented groups as critical to fulfilling our mission.

Generally, our partnerships are as follows:

- Partnerships with non-profits. Non-profit members of Access SF use their membership benefits to create Public Service Announcements (“PSAs”) and other mission-critical programming for television and the Internet. Since nonprofits and community-based groups generally do not have the staffing, resources and expertise to create and deliver messages via local media, their partnerships with Access SF are an important component of their visibility and ability to deliver on their missions.
- Partnerships with cultural and community centers. Our partnerships with community and cultural centers result in programming that showcases San Francisco’s cultural diversity. For example, Access SF volunteers and staff worked together last year to present “A Night of Blues” in cooperation with the African American Art and Culture. Now that the City’s network of community and cultural centers is wired for live programming, many such programming opportunities will be available in the future.
- Partnerships with the government. Our partnerships with government agencies enable local governments to communicate to their publics, provide timely information, and engage constituents in public issues. For example, Access SF worked with the Dept of Public Health to produce a 30-second PSA directing youth via mobile texting to a City website for information on STD prevention.
- Partnerships with local businesses. Our support of and by local businesses is another way we serve the community effectively. Our partnerships with local businesses have involved them as contributors of their resources to support local producers and productions.

Access SF expects that these partnerships and others will grow over time in response to the community's needs, issues and changing demographics. Although partnerships do not necessarily result in increased resources for public access operations, they are an essential aspect of public access and do result in meaningful local programming that otherwise would not be available to the community.

Do models exist in which multiple entities provide public access services in partnership arrangements?

Access SF has been involved in the community media field for 20 years and we are acquainted with many public access providers. We have not come across any examples in which multiple organizations in a community provide public access services.

What would be the disadvantages to a multiple operator model?

At the heart of public access is the process of engaging people in training and community-based production as a hands-on experience. This is a progression of interrelated steps, in which continuity and consistency are key — from training to equipment utilization to program production. Staff encouragement and technical support at each stage are essential for success; as trainees grow in their experience, less staff support is needed over time. Also, a consistent level of training ensures a higher quality experience for the community. With a multiple operator approach to public access services, continuity and consistency would be lost and the risk of people “falling through the cracks” rises dramatically.

Again, if such models have been successfully implemented in other cities, please provide references.

3. State and Federal deregulation of cable television services threatens to eliminate the current sources of financial support for public access channel operations. Please identify the most likely and realistic alternative sources for public access funding.

Access SF believes that the most realistic and appropriate source of operational funding is to increase the percentage of franchise fees allocated for PEG in the Telecommunications and Information Services Cable Television Access Development and Programming Fund. (City and County of San Francisco Municipal Code Administrative Code, Sec. 10.100-341.) The Board of Supervisors established this fund in the early 1980s to stimulate the development of the PEG channels. The current .2% percentage contributes only a little over \$100,000 per year toward the total cost of public access operations. In light of DIVCA, the next phase in developing the public access channels will require increasing the funding from the cable franchise fees to a level that will provide adequate and sustainable funding for public access. The national public access community views funding public access operations as a fair and legitimate use of cable franchise fees. Access SF determines that the annual operations funding for public access should be in the range of \$1.1 to \$1.2 million per year.

What would be the expected amount and duration of each alternative funding source described?

Raising the franchise fees allocation for PEG support would raise approximately \$1.1 to \$1.2 million for public access and the duration would be for the period of time the city receives franchise fees from video operators.

Would alternative funding become available only in annual cycles (which would require reapplying for each cycle), or are long-term funding sources available?

The public access community strongly believes that the Cable Television Access Development and Programming Fund is a resource intended for the community. The Cable Television Access Development and Programming Fund is built into the City's budget with the potential to serve as a long-term funding source for public access. Once the gross revenues percentage split is reset by city ordinance, the funding amount would not be subject to the city's annual budgeting process but instead would only be subject to the fluctuations of cable operator profits.

4. What types of fund raising activities might be employed to generate revenue for public access?

Sustaining public access operations at an appropriate level will require a dedicated funding source (as outlined in Question 3).

As a tax-exempt 501-c-3 organization, Access SF will continue to supplement public access resources through the following: membership fees, fees for workshops and production services, grant-writing to fund specific projects, and soliciting donations such as business sponsorships and underwriting.

Would sponsorship, underwriting and advertising campaigns be viable means of generating alternative funding?

Sponsorships and underwriting could raise supplemental funding, but not enough to sustain core functions. Access SF has initiated sponsorships, but is careful to prioritize and preserve the interests of the community. As such, there are limits to the extent that sponsorships, underwriting and advertising can usefully assist the public access mission. Nevertheless, we continue to explore these options to uncover mutually beneficial arrangements where they are available.

With additional staffing, we believe some increase in sponsorship revenue would be possible; however, it is uncertain whether or not it would be at a level that would fully offset the cost of additional staffing.

Advertising campaigns are not utilized by public access centers, which have historically operated as tax-exempt nonprofit entities with charitable rather than commercial missions (as determined by the IRS).

It is critical to note that Access SF has identified three major barriers to advertising campaigns:

(1) significant advertising would endanger the organization's 501-c-3 federal tax-exempt status based on IRS rules;

(2) advertising would be contrary to the culture and mission of public access as a source of independent and commercial free media; and

(3) advertising on public access channels could create competition with other cable channels, and this could provide a basis for cable companies to challenge public benefits such as franchise requirements for PEG channels and capital funding.

Again, our limited existing funding requires that we continue to review sponsorships, underwriting and advertising opportunities to uncover beneficial relationships that do not jeopardize the core values of public access.

If so, what would be the cost to administer the programs?

To pursue sponsorships or underwriting at an increased level would require staff specifically dedicated to this task. However, as noted above, it is questionable whether or not sponsorship/underwriting revenue would fully offset the cost of the additional staffing.

Conservatively, how much revenue might such programs generate after their costs are recovered?

PEG Access operations, including Access SF, have not typically generated significant revenues via underwriting and sponsorships.

Since PEG access operations have not been engaged in generating advertising revenue, and there are significant barriers to doing so, we have not projected advertising revenue.

5. If budget constraints require a reduction in public access service levels, which services should be identified as minimum or "core" services that are essential to continued channel operation?

Core services are:

- (1) Community outreach;
- (2) Training (including traditional and new media training);
- (3) Utilization and access to production equipment and facilities;
- (4) Programming and playback of community generated programming;
- (5) Marketing and promotion;
- (6) Development;
- (7) Supervision, operation and maintenance of the facility;

- (8) Management of staff, facilities, and the nonprofit organization that oversees public access.

What financial resources are required to meet minimum service levels?

Minimum service levels to provide basic services for a city the size of and with the needs of San Francisco require a developed and adequately paid staff of 9 or more full time employees.

Minimum facilities requirements to provide adequate space for studios, editing, equipment storage and checkout, programming, training, community meetings, and administration, would begin at about 7,500 sq. feet.

The operational costs for such facilities and staff would be approximately \$1.1 to \$1.2 million annually, which is about 15% of the revenue the city receives in franchise fees from locally operating cable operators.

What operational guidelines or strategies can be employed to ensure that these core services remain available?

After 30 years of experience, the national public access community has come to support the following guidelines and strategies:

1. Public access services should be managed through a City-designated public-interest non-profit organization, established specifically to manage public access services.
2. The managing NPO is one whose board and key staff has a successful track record of providing such services and implementing best practices in the field.
3. Core services should be ensured by developing a stable and reliable funding source.
4. Management should be provided through a multi-year renewable contract or grant agreement.

Would any of these approaches require changes in the management or governance of facilities or programming time?

If P&G operations were combined, this would potentially represent a change from City to nonprofit (Access SF) management of the government access channel.

6. Please identify any innovations in video production/distribution equipment, techniques or processes that, if implemented, might lead to a reduction in operating costs. What would be the expected scope of cost savings achieved?

Innovation and technology are keys to Access SF's success and Access SF highly values innovation and technology in serving the public access community.

Access SF keeps abreast of and has already taken advantage of several new technologies as they have become available over the years. One example is an affordable, automated channel playback system that has helped free up staff time. Whereas staff previously spent time manually playing videotapes one by one, this process is now automated thanks to this technology. As systems have become more automated and programmable, this has allowed programming staff to work on other critical programming duties, such as exploring new ways to make programming schedules more accessible and searchable by the viewing public.

It is important to note that in some cases, new technologies can actually create more demand for staff resources. For instance, when new production equipment is utilized, a need for more staff time is created. Additional staff time is required to be spent in initial training and ongoing support of public access volunteers as the community begins using the new media tools. Technology and media tools do not exist and work successfully in a vacuum of training and support, particularly when being used by non-professional media makers, who are at the core of public access use.

One area where significant core operating costs (e.g. rent, utilities and facilities maintenance) could be reduced would be to find less expensive or free facilities space -- by relocating public access facilities into City-owned/provided/maintained property.

Another way to save on core costs would be to consider combining separately run P, E, and or G into a single PEG or P&G facility managed by Access SF and/or to share core costs such as engineering/equipment repair and maintenance.

What video production equipment and facilities should be provided by the public access facility?

Field, editing, studio production, dubbing, playback, Internet streaming / video on demand facilities and equipment.

7. Please describe the level of training that should be provided at the public access facility.

Public access training should include all phases of pre-production, production and post-production for field and studio productions. Training should be offered in emerging technologies/applications such as social networking, vlogging, blogging and Internet video production, uploading and streaming.

In addition to technological training, the community needs hands-on skill-building as well as critical analysis, so that community members are empowered to “decode” media messages and create their own media messages. Workshops in program promotion and distribution should be included.

All levels of training should be available to people of all socio-economic levels and cultures, as this is what enables the mandate of public access to be truly fulfilled.

Specialized training and production opportunities should be available to nonprofits and community-based organizations, and groups that have been underserved and/or underrepresented in the mainstream media.

What alternative video training opportunities are available in San Francisco?

BAVC, City College, USF, SFSU and the Art Institute of California.

Can these alternatives adequately replace public access training services? Why or why not?

The alternative video training opportunities available to the community are significantly more expensive than the public access training provided by Access SF.

More importantly, public access training is by design integrated with the entire public access experience, which involves engaging people in training and developing community-based productions. This process includes “formal” training, such as workshops, as well as “informal” training in the form of staff encouragement and technical support, which are critical to the success of non-professional media makers as they utilize various equipment systems over time to develop their community productions.

The staff of Access SF view their duties to extend beyond simply providing the technology and skills to facilitate public access. Embedded in Access SF training is a strong emphasis on community building, which goes above and beyond technical training.

8. Recently, outlets for expression have evolved beyond traditional television, radio and cable TV. What should be the role of traditional public access facilities with the emergence of “new media” such as Internet streaming video, social networking sites, video on demand, podcasting and other developments?

Public access should continue to embrace new media tools in addition to television. Access SF is committed to this path and has already implemented Internet video streaming, video on demand, and social networking. We are also integrating vlogging, blogging, video posts and streaming within public access training. As San Francisco’s public access provider, Access SF is the local “bridge,” helping the community to understand and make use of emerging communications tools.

Access SF is excited about working to explore new opportunities. We believe that Access SF can act as a service that can bridge facilities-based content generation with both Internet and cable-based delivery. Access SF is working on some innovative opportunities to allow SF residents to come to the studio and publish a video on both cable and the Internet. We are working on ways to record videos at home/school/work and publish on cable. Access SF is in a unique place to drive convergence of TV and Internet for the SF community and is working with selected broadcast & technology partners.

9. What are the most effective means of raising awareness of public access channel services to potential producers?

Ideally, a dedicated advertising budget should support the raising of awareness of public access. However, other effective means currently employed include personal outreach to nonprofits and underserved communities (e.g., by staff and board members), the cable channels, the cable operators' electronic program guides (EPGs), websites, YouTube, Facebook, word of mouth, collaborations with community centers and academic institutions.

The public access community also believes the City should make a concerted effort to integrate awareness of the PEG system on all PEG channels.

How can channel operators best inform producers about the availability of existing or new public access services or tools?

Email, discuss lists, direct mailing, direct staff contact and use of the channel, social networking sites, off-site workshops.

Please identify and provide references for any marketing efforts that have been successful in other cities of for other channels.

We have been impressed with the efforts of the Chicago Access Network (CAN-TV) to market the public access "brand" through a citywide campaign highlighting programs that make a difference. This effort, which was initiated several years ago, was launched with significant pro-bono support from a major advertising firm in Chicago. <http://www.cantv.org/>

10. What are the most effective means of promoting the channels and scheduled programs to potential viewers?

Having PEG programming included in mainstream electronic program guides (EPGs), such as TV Guide and cable operators' own EPG's, creating searchable schedules and Video-On-Demand. Also, up-next screens on the channels, program schedules on the Internet, program listings in the newspapers and e-newsletters.

How do viewers decide what television programs to watch, and how can public access operators use this information to effectively promote public access programming?

We are not aware of any local data that addresses this question. However, Access SF has anecdotal evidence of public access programs that have built up audiences and addressed specific needs within the community. Often this is the result of targeted promotion and networking by the groups

involved in developing community productions. We believe efforts to promote public access programming could be strengthened with additional emphasis on program promotion through training and partnering with community producers/groups; this is particularly important due to the shift from “channels” to an “on demand” environment.

How may alternative distribution channels, such as Internet web casting or video on demand services, be promoted to potential viewers?

Creating searchable schedules and Video-On-Demand and conducting customized outreach to targeted audiences (e.g., e-blasts to health professionals about and AIDS prevention program, utilization of social networking sites, etc.).

Again, please identify and provide references for any marketing efforts that have been successful in other cities or for other channels.

11. What should be the long-term goals for public access in the Internet age?

The long-term goals for public access are to provide the community with the tools of media production and training in their use, and to enable the community to exercise its free speech, express alternative viewpoints, and strengthen localism and community activism. This includes Internet tools/applications and any other community communication tools that evolve over time.