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**BODY:**

Times Herald

Local municipalities, such as Port Huron and Marysville, have been scrambling this week to make sure their city council meetings still will be broadcast on public access channels next year.

As part of Comcast's move to have public access shows broadcast in digital formatting, the company is closing its Michigan studios that tape and broadcast those meetings.

While Comcast officials said local public access channels still will be on basic tiers, users who don't have digital cable will need a digital converter box to access the stations, which will be on channels 900 and 902 starting Jan. 15. Rumors that users with Limited Basic, Senior Preferred Basic or Preferred Basic cable service will need to upgrade to digital is untrue, Comcast officials said.

Those users still can access the 900 channels with a digital converter box.

Included in the closings is the Channel 12 studio in New Haven, which broadcasts in St. Clair and northern Macomb counties, Channel 12 station manager Robbin Torrey said.

The station, along with 12 others across the state, will cease operations Dec. 14. That means after that date, Comcast no longer will film board meetings.

Torrey said he and his staff typically tape meetings for the Port Huron City Council, Marysville City Council and the Chesterfield Township Board of Trustees.

"I'm really shocked that they would make these changes with no notice to us," said Port Huron City Manager Karl Tomion. "This doesn't even give us time to try and find a way to broadcast our council meetings."

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Tomion and his staff have been talking with Comcast officials and meeting with people who broadcast on public access Channel 6 to try and find a way to keep meetings going. Channel 6 is run by local school districts and municipalities. While it will change to digital formatting, its staff will be unaffected.

Tomion said for the City Council's Jan. 14 meeting, the city most likely will hire someone for \$15 an hour to tape the council meeting, which Comcast will air on Channel 900. He said the city still needs to develop a long-term plan, which could include contracting with someone for services or hiring a staff person to do the work.

Torrey, who will be out of a job Dec. 14, said this change will negatively impact viewers of Channel 12, as well as its users. Organizations now will have to send tapes to Comcast in Southfield, where they will then be broadcast to different areas.

Torrey said the small station in New Haven has had a big impact on local communities. His examples included the taping and broadcasting of a Port Huron City Council candidate forum in October, which he showed live and then edited and replayed on election day.

"It's the end of an era," he said.

Marysville City Manager Jack Schumacher said the city has contracted with Torrey to tape their council meetings after Dec. 14. He believes they still will be live.

"It's very confusing," Schumacher said. "We're not happy with it, but it's what Comcast is doing."

Comcast spokeswoman Louise Beller said the company is getting out of the production business. Many communities already broadcast their own public access programming, she said.

"We working with communities on how to best transition this," Beller said.

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