

F.C.C. Pushes for Web Site on TV Political Ad Spending

The government is moving forward with a plan to make local television stations post information about political advertising on a central Web site.

Owners of local stations have tried to block the proposal, but it appears likely to be approved by the commissioners of the [Federal Communications Commission](#) when they convene later this month.

By law, stations are required to keep so-called public files at their offices for inspection by members of the public. The files typically include information about programming, staffing and spending on political ads.

But few people know the files exist, and even fewer go to stations to view them. The F.C.C. wants to change that by having the stations upload the files to an F.C.C. Web site.

The agency first tried to do so back in 2007, but was stymied by legal challenges. It renewed the effort last fall, leading to complaints from major TV broadcasters.

In comments before the agency in January, a broadcaster trade group asserted that the required uploading would be an unnecessary financial burden for local stations and would have “no clear public benefit.”

The clear public benefits, according to advocates of the proposal, are easier access to public information and added transparency about the political ads that frequently dominate the public airwaves during campaigns. The files identify the buyers of political ads and the prices paid for them.

On Friday, the F.C.C. signaled that it would vote on the proposal

at its meeting on April 27. Acknowledging the feedback from stations, the proposal will give smaller stations two more years to start uploading new additions to their files about political ad spending. At the outset, only the affiliates of ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox in the top 50 TV markets will be required to do so.

The F.C.C. says the initial uploading will cost less than \$1,000 for a typical station, and will save the stations money over time by avoiding printing and storage costs.

The uploaded files will be searchable — but only inside one file at a time. At least at first, it won't be possible to conduct searches across all the files, to determine which person or political group has spent the most money on ads across the country, for instance. Critics have said that without fully searchable files, Internet accessibility is only a slight improvement over the status quo.

Last month, the nonprofit news Web site ProPublica decided to recruit its readers in an effort to scan the political ad files of local stations and publish them online.

The site's social media editor, Daniel Victor, said, "We tend to like the idea of public data being online."