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## Access 4 producers wish to take over station

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**THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER**

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Local public access television producers are hoping to pick up where Comcast will leave off next month, when the cable provider ceases operation of Access 4.

Comcast has said it's in negotiations with a "third party" to take over the station, but it declined to say who.

But Access 4 producer and soon-to-be-laid-off employee Darrel Moore said he and other producers are the third party.

"What's happened around the country, according to our research, is it's (public access programming) usually gone to a private civic organization or charity," Moore said. "So I think if the producers band together, they may be able to rejuvenate the channel."

Producers are scheduled to meet at the station Tuesday night to discuss the situation.

Rich Ruggiero, a spokesman for Comcast, declined to verify whether the producers are the "third party" in question.

"At this point, we don't want to divulge anything about what we're planning right now, but hopefully we'll reach a point soon where we can," Ruggiero said Friday.

As word of Comcast's decision spread, producers and other veterans of public access TV in Springfield — some dating back to its local founding in the 1980s — have said it's a worthwhile service that ought to be continued.

Rich Morris, a vice president and senior wealth management consultant at U.S. Bank, has been producing "Great Things for Good People" for the better part of a decade.

The show profiles charities and non-profits that might otherwise not get a lot of time on television, such as the Mini O'Beirne Crisis Nursery, the Sojourn Shelter and the Illinois Symphony Orchestra.

"Normally, if you're running a foundation, you're on a very limited budget, and it's very difficult to get airtime or advertising," Morris said Thursday.

But gradual staffing cuts leading up to the Dec. 4 layoffs have made it harder and harder to tape new episodes, Morris said.

Comcast took over operation of Access 4 several years ago. Before then, it had been operated at the University of Illinois Springfield.

Gerald Burkhart, director of the Office of Electronic Media at UIS, said Comcast pulled Access 4 out of the university when UIS decided not to renew its contract with Comcast to provide cable to apartments and dorms on campus.

Comcast and predecessor cable companies had paid UIS to operate Access 4. The station's budget at the time was about \$170,000 per year, Burkhart said, and Access 4 had one full-time employee, one part-time worker and numerous student workers.

For about a year, Access 4 has been running with just three part-time staffers, including Moore, who said he's paid \$11 per hour.

The job consists of working with producers to tape shows, editing the programs and feeding them into a computer that connects by fiber-optic cable to Comcast's "head end," a facility that collects programming and distributes it throughout the region.

Moore said there will be little new content in the station's last two weeks — most producers have been calling to cancel scheduled tapings as word of Comcast's decision spreads. Moore said he called 80 producers of Access 4 programs; most of them are meeting Tuesday night to discuss how they can keep the station going.

Asked if UIS has considered trying to get Access 4 back on campus, Burkhart said no. Having Access 4 on campus had benefits for UIS, but the university now operates its own cable channel and transmits lectures and other events on the Web.

Despite the proliferation of online video distribution, Burkhart said public access TV is still an important service.

That sentiment was echoed by Dave Antoine, a retired UIS employee who worked on Access 4 for many of his 30 years with the school.

"The nice thing about public access (is) it's almost a reflection of the community. It's a way of finding out who are the various types of members in our community, see how our community thinks," Antoine said. "We don't always get around as much as we'd like. It gives you a broad view."

Moore said his charity program has generated "well over \$1 million" in donations to groups featured over the years.

"It's a social responsibility that a company certainly the size of Comcast has. They are in the media business, and they knew that came along with it," he

said. "That's just part of your social cost of doing business.

"I think they need to step up to the plate and continue it, but from what I've seen of the company, that's not going to happen."

Brian Mackey can be reached at 747-9587.

#### **About Access 4's programming**

Access 4's Web site says the station serves the Springfield community "by producing and airing local programming that can't be seen anywhere else."

Programs on Access 4 change from day to day, with each program typically being repeated three times a day.

About half of Access 4 programs are explicitly religious in nature. Others cover political topics ("Conservative Roundtable"), advice ("Parent Helpline"), discussions ("Springfield Business and Economic Review") or a variety of subjects ("Just Two Guys," "Talking Toastmasters," "What's Up Downtown").

The station's full schedule is available at [www.access4springfield.com](http://www.access4springfield.com).

#### **Cable provider has closed stations in other states**

Comcast's decision to cease operating Access 4 in Springfield appears to be part of a broader national trend.

The cable provider has made similar moves in Michigan, Massachusetts and elsewhere.

And in the Chicago suburb of Mundelein, Comcast has decided to stop transmitting video of town government and school meetings.

According to a report in the Mundelein Review, Comcast made its decision after AT&T balked at the rates Comcast was seeking to allow AT&T to transmit government access programming on its U-verse service.

Comcast spokesman Rich Ruggiero said the cable provider is trying to get Mundelein to take over management of government access programming.

"In many cases the communities were eager to take on the management of the government-access programming because in some cases, they were even able to produce more programming and more live programming," Ruggiero said. "And we're hopeful we'll ultimately reach a similar agreement with Mundelein, and we're working toward that now."

Ruggiero emphasized that the Mundelein case is not related to Comcast's move in Springfield.

But he did obliquely refer to AT&T and its U-verse service and satellite TV providers.

"When you look at the people that Comcast competes with for someone's entertainment dollar and the obligations that they have or don't have with respect to public access programming, we think it's important to be on as level a playing field as possible so that we can be as competitive as possible," Ruggiero said.

Ruggiero declined to speculate about what might happen to Channel 4 if no one steps up to take over operation of the community access station.

Comcast has bumped several channels from its analog service (Channels 2-72) to a digital package (usually a three-digit channel number that requires a newer TV or converter box), including the National Geographic Channel and C-SPAN2.

Comcast says this allows a greater number of channels overall because a single analog channel takes as much bandwidth as numerous digital channels or up to three high-definition channels.

Ruggiero said the public access decision has nothing to do with this practice.

#### **Mayor's office working with Comcast**

Mayor Tim Davlin's office is working with Comcast to determine the future of the public access channel, according to the city's spokesman.

"Tim Davlin wants to be sure the public continues to have the opportunity to present their views via a public access outlet such as Access 4," said Ernie Slottag, the city's spokesman.

Under an agreement with the city, Comcast must provide three channels for public, educational and governmental access programming.

The agreement doesn't allow any other municipality to use the channels or for a charge to be imposed for use of the channel capacity.

However, the 55-page agreement, which expires Jan. 1, 2013, doesn't require Comcast to operate the channels — only provide them.

Slottag said the city is reviewing whether it would be a breach of the franchise agreement if Comcast doesn't find an operator and simply allows the access channel to go blank.

— Deana Poole