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Tuning In

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Goleta City Council broadcasts debut tonight on public access television.

Regular television broadcasts of Goleta City Council sessions start tonight, after more than three years of official preparation and outside pressure aimed at putting the public meetings on cable.

Recorded live in their entirety, the Monday afternoon and evening sessions held at two locations -- and typically lasting six hours or more -- will run unedited on Friday nights and early Saturday mornings. They will appear on the educational public access Channel 21, which is operated by the nonprofit Santa Barbara Channels.

Viewers tuning in tonight or Saturday will see council members, dressed a bit spiffier than normal, make decisions on a range of concerns -- from street improvements to the Monday hiring of new City Manager Daniel Singer.

"I'm just really happy that it's finally happened," Mayor Jean Blois said this week. "It's a very good move for opening things up more to the public, so they feel a little more involved."

"Hopefully, it brings more people into the discussion," Councilwoman Cynthia Brock said, adding with a chuckle that "we are all a little more concerned about whether our collars are straight."

Tensions flared at times during the buildup to these broadcasts. And debate over their merits may not be finished, with a significant interruption to the schedule possible after Jan. 1.

The launch comes days after a new UCSB survey shows that in Santa Barbara, about three-quarters of cable television subscribers watch government access television.

Public pressure on Goleta to embrace television mushroomed after the summer of 2003, when the city received \$250,000 from Cox Communications to buy broadcast equipment, under the terms of a cable franchise agreement.

Officials tapped the fund to buy new speakers and microphones for meetings. But the bulk of the money is still unused. Officials have said they are waiting to design a permanent City Hall meeting location.

Since shortly after Goleta incorporated in early 2002, the council has met Monday afternoons at the Goleta Valley Community Center on Hollister Avenue, and Monday nights at the Goleta Union School District headquarters on Fairview Avenue.

Worried that constituents would miss important debates, some outside organizations and residents repeatedly took the council to task for not televising its meetings with a portable system.

Pressure climaxed in April, when the Chamber of Commerce hired a private crew to record two council meetings. Without permission from the city, however, the Santa Barbara Channels would not broadcast the recordings in their entirety. At the time, Channels executive director Hap Freund said that, at several hours each, the recordings did not comply with a policy that generally restricts the run time of nongovernment-sponsored shows to no more than 58 minutes and 30 seconds.

In recent weeks, the city shouldered the burden on its own and solidified agreements to get its meetings on the air with the Santa Barbara Channels and the city of Santa Barbara. In addition to council meetings, Planning Agency meetings will be broadcast starting Sept. 12.

At the chamber, President and CEO Kristen Amyx this week welcomed the broadcasts. "This is a key element to setting up our brand-new city government. Now nobody has to take my commentary, or yours, or the Valley Voice to heart without also seeing it for themselves."

Goleta has hired a two-member crew using two cameras from the city of Santa Barbara government access Channel 18 to record council meetings at a cost of \$82 per hour. Goleta set aside \$45,000 for the expense in its current budget.

"The city of Goleta has done everything they can to make it as easy as possible for us," said Tony Ruggieri, Santa Barbara City TV production supervisor. He said Santa Barbara has hired a part-time employee and, using grant money, added \$11,000 in equipment to its arsenal. "We've been planning on putting an inexpensive portable system together for a long time. We just accelerated a little bit."

The Santa Barbara Channels is required to run officially sanctioned Goleta council meetings on a public or educational access station only through the end of this year, after which Goleta is entitled to its own government access channel.

But Goleta has not yet decided whether or when to set up that station.

"I'm happy that we can help them," said Mr. Freund. "It's good for us, and it's good for the community."

But how long the Santa Barbara Channels could accommodate Goleta on Channel 21 after Jan. 1 is an open question. If Goleta goes too long into 2006 without its own channel, the broadcasts could cease.

"They haven't really approached us about that," Mr. Freund said. "If we knew it was going to take them two more months or three more months, that would be one thing. Forever, probably not."



LEN WOOD/NEWS-PRESS

Tony Ruggieri, Santa Barbara City TV production supervisor, works on the video of Monday's Goleta City Council meeting. Regular television broadcasts of the meetings begin tonight.

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