

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



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## Forget 'West Wing'

### These television viewers riveted by local government

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Instead of watching "CSI" or MTV's "The Real World" Season 16, more than a couple of couch potatoes in Santa Barbara are surfing the dial to Channel 18 catching the latest episode of how the city churns.

When they could be seeing if Gil Grisson and his Las Vegas CSI crime lab team will solve the latest top-rated mystery on CBS, people are actually watching the sometimes marathon meetings of the City Council, the Planning Commission or the Architectural Board of Review.

While it's not on par with the Nielsen rating system, a new survey by UCSB shows that about three-quarters of cable television subscribers in the city watch the government access channel. City TV broadcasts a range of city meetings, and shows like the Spanish language city news program, "Nuestra Ciudad," as well as a popular news magazine called "Inside Santa Barbara."

For the telephone survey, 400 households were contacted out of 29,592 cable subscribers between Oct. 11 and Nov. 4, 2004. About 25 percent watch Channel 18 on a weekly basis and almost 6 percent watch it every day.

"Well, it's a measure of the effectiveness of the service to know that people are watching and pretty well-informed about what's going on in the city," said Tony Ruggieri, the production supervisor for City TV.

Mr. Ruggieri and the survey author Jon Sonstelie, director of UCSB's Social Science Survey Center and the Benton Survey Research Lab, will present the findings at a City Council meeting this afternoon. The meeting, of course, can be viewed live on City TV Channel 18 and will be rebroadcast on the channel throughout the week.

The numbers are considered good, said Mr. Ruggieri. There is not a nationwide survey to show averages for viewership in communities with government access television, but anecdotally the percentage of cable subscribers watching City TV is considered high. Surveys in other communities are not directly comparable because the questions are different. The survey also doesn't do what the Nielsen ratings do, which is, show how many people are actually watching a given show on a given night.



Tony Ruggieri, the production supervisor for City TV, and Christy Julin, a production assistant, work in the editing studio in the basement of City Hall.

The UCSB survey, which has a sampling error of plus or minus 4.9 percent, really just gauges whether people use the service and it shows that indeed they do, in large numbers.

By comparison, a recent survey in Bellevue, Wash., a city of comparable size, showed that only about 20 percent of the cable subscribers watched government access programming there. A survey last year in Tampa, which is about three times the size of Santa Barbara, found that about a third of subscribers watched its government access programming.

One factor in the number of people watching is how high a government access channel is on the dial. The lower the number, the higher the viewership, said Mr. Ruggieri. This is in part because most of those who watch have stumbled on the broadcast by channel surfing. And of all the programming provided, coverage of the City Council meetings is the most watched, with the "Inside Santa Barbara" show a close second.

The survey didn't ask viewers how long they watched any given program. And there were some responses that begged a bit of skepticism — education and news were at the top of what viewers said they watched. But the responses showed consistency, said Mr. Sonstelie. The numbers also show that more people with cable are watching than in 1997, when more than 40 percent of cable viewers said they never watched Channel 18.

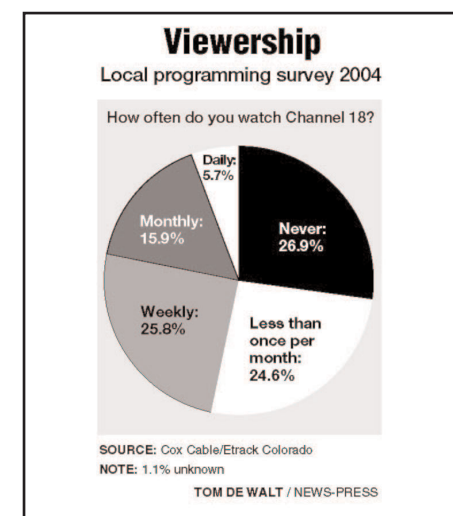
Although there's no way to tell if those surveyed were actually watching, say, a rebroadcast of the "Creeks Restoration/Water Quality Advisory Committee" meeting or "Jerry Springer's Bad Boys & Naughty Girls" on pay-for-view, the survey seems to show a consistent pattern of viewership.

"People do appear to know about City TV and watch it in larger numbers than I would

Barbara" is hosted by former KEYT-TV news reporter Larry Good, and the longer half-hour format allows the producers to spend eight to 10 minutes on each story.

"On television news programs, they have to tell a story in two minutes or less and we have a little more time," Mr. Ruggieri said.

That gives the stories a bit more heft and room to explain some of the more complicated or detailed issues facing the city. But the content is from the city's perspective. Mr. Ruggieri's boss, Assistant City Manager Marcelo Lopez, exercises editorial control.



These are definitely not independent takes on city business.

"That's not our job," Mr. Ruggieri said. "Our job is to get the city's message out."

Some of the shows or segments on the news magazine "Inside Santa Barbara" are done at the request of a city department. One segment on this month's show covers the renovations at the Santa Barbara Municipal Airport. The idea for the new program, "Garden Wise Guys" — a show that tries with humor to give people ideas for designing and maintaining plants that use little water — came out of a joint city Public Works Department and Santa Barbara County Water Agency desire to encourage water conservation by homeowners.

Government access television, not to be confused with the no-holds-barred frontier of public access television, is a child of cable franchising in communities across the country. The argument in support of such programming is that it gives citizens a vital link to what their local government is doing. It's another door to participate.

Typically, a cable company's franchise contract includes obligations to dedicate a channel to public access and government access. The companies often have to pony up for equipment to put broadcasts together. While there is a county government access channel that serves all of Santa Barbara County, the city of Santa Barbara's government access programming is just shown to cable subscribers in the city. Carpinteria broadcasts its council meetings, and the Goleta City Council just approved broadcasting its meetings.

As cable faces increasing competition from satellite providers and people who watch less television in favor of using the Internet say, government access broadcasters are looking to other frontiers. Mr. Ruggieri said the next stage for City TV is live Web broadcasts.

"We're experimenting with internal broadcasts, but that's where we'd like to go," he said.



Tony Ruggieri is the production supervisor for City TV, which broadcasts a range of city meetings, as well as shows such as "Inside Santa Barbara," and "Garden Wise Guys," which uses humor to give people ideas for designing and maintaining plants that use little water.

have expected," Mr. Sonstelie said.

Housed in a cramped studio in the basement at City Hall, the crew of three full-time staffers — three hourly employees, one or two interns during the school year and a budget of about \$360,000 — put together the live and rebroadcast coverage of city meetings and a handful of city shows.

In 2001, Mr. Ruggieri and producer videographer Chris Bell won a Pacific Southwest region Emmy for "Impressions in Time," a historical show on Santa Barbara's 150th anniversary. City TV's "Inside Santa

