

Franklin Township Debates Debate [Armando Diana](#)

Date: Tuesday, August 9, 2005

Event: Franklin Township Council Meeting (Chase) Re-submitted on 10/3/05

Candidates running for political office will typically jump at an opportunity for greater exposure to their platforms and if the Franklin Township mayor has his way all candidates will have the power of television to debate their views over the local public access channel.

But Mayor Brian Levine's attempts to get the matter voted on has died on the dais as none of the other council members would second his motion for a straw vote on the matter at a meeting earlier this month. Levine, the lone Republican on the nine-member council, has vowed to try again at the next meeting scheduled for October 11.

"I was explicitly clear in my request," Levine said in a phone interview. "I asked for a straw vote to see if they (the council) wanted to put the question on the agenda. Since no one seconded the straw vote I will try again at the next meeting."

Levine said if the straw vote had failed he would have dropped the matter saying "I believe in the Jeffersonian belief to put it (an issue) out there and let the people decide."

This dispute has been brewing in Franklin Township ever since a citizens group questioned township officials over whether political candidates can debate on the local government access channel. A number of council members believe allowing a debate on a local government access channel is illegal.

Phil Kramer, a member of a watchdog group called Taxpayers United in Franklin Township (TUF), had called the FCC and learned debates on local government access channels are not only not illegal but are encouraged.

"The over riding issue is that people need information to help them decide on who to elect to represent them," Kramer said in an interview. "Such information is typically lacking for local elections. A debate on the Township's television station would go a long way towards providing such information."

According to Kramer, representatives at the FCC said there is no specific reference prohibiting political debates on local government access channels. In addition, Don Schilke, Director of Franklin in Technology and a volunteer at FT-TV, said the governing bodies decide programming choices and can choose to allow debates. Schilke represents the township at the Jersey Access Group (JAG), a consortium of community-run Public, Educational, Governmental (PEG) TV stations in New Jersey.

The Star Ledger contacted the FCC, the State Department, the State Board of Public Utilities, and JAG. Each group said political debates are not banned from local government access channels.

"I haven't been asked by the governing body to research the issue and can't render an opinion until they do," said township attorney Louis Rainone in a phone interview earlier this month.

However, Levine said the purpose of a local government access channel was to keep the public informed of local government activity. He said he would support having debates on the local government access channel but said the recommendation must come from the proper committee.

"I believe that candidates for political office should have the ability to debate on a local government access channel, or at least have a candidates' forum wherein each candidate gets a set amount of time give his/her position," said Levine in an interview. "This is not bringing politics into the government-run channel, but giving the residents a chance to hear what is on the minds of those who seek to run the government."

But Bill Grippo, Democratic Municipal Chairperson, said the party is more than willing to participate in a forum at a neutral site but believes local government access channels should not be used for political purposes. He said the Democratic candidates will go door-to-door and meet with constituent groups to discuss the issues.

"We don't believe that the local government access channel is appropriately used for political debate," Grippo said in a phone interview. "We don't want to politicize the channel."

Grippo said until the council and cable committee decide differently the local government access channel should not be used for debates.

Schilke said PCTV, a local government access channel in Piscataway, offers political candidates three minute interviews. He said the station broadcasts into 10 tons including Bound Brook and Green Brook.

"Persons who seek to be elected will be the ones controlling the taxes and making laws. I cannot understand why someone would not want every opportunity to communicate to the public," Levine said. "In the same vein, I feel the public should demand such a non-partisan forum to assess their candidates."