

Franklin Twp. mayor pushing for debates on local-access TV

Some balk at politics on government channel, but others see need for information

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A suggestion by the Franklin Township mayor that debates between municipal candidates be carried on the local government television channel got an icy reception from the council last month.

But Mayor Brian Levine said he plans to continue pressing the issue at Tuesday's council meeting.

"I was explicitly clear in my request," Levine said. "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."

Five of the eight members on the all-Democrat council are up for re-election in November, though two of them are running unopposed. Levine is a Republican.

"We don't believe that the local government access channel is appropriately used for political debate," said Democratic Municipal Chairman Bill Grippo. "We don't want to politicize the channel."

FTTV-25 typically is used to broadcast township council meetings, which are rerun through the week. Some council members have said that injecting political debates into the channel's lineup could be against broadcasting rules.

"The overriding issue is that people need information to help them decide on who to elect to represent them," said Phil Kramer, a member of a watchdog group called Taxpayers United in Franklin Township. "Such information is typically lacking for local elections. A debate on the township's television station would go a long way toward providing such information."

Kramer said representatives at the Federal Communications Commission informed him that there is no specific reference prohibiting political debates on local government access channels.

Don Schilke, director of Franklin in Technology and a volunteer at FTTV, said elected officials decide programming choices and can opt to allow debates. Schilke represents the township at the Jersey Access Group, a consortium of community-run public, educational and governmental television stations in New Jersey.

"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.

However, Levine said he believes that the purpose of a municipal government access channel is to keep the public informed.

"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," Levine said. "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."