

Memo to: Legislative Council, Jan. 25, 2016

From: Stephen Maly, Helena Civic Television-TVMT/Special Projects

Re: Brief responses to several questions raised at November Council Meeting

## **I. How programming decisions are made**

**Session Committees.** During Legislative Sessions, Helena Civic TV produces three committee proceedings each morning and afternoon. All of these events are carried on the closed circuit television system in the capitol. Only one can be transmitted *LIVE* across the TVMT network. The others are transmitted in the evening or on the subsequent weekend. Typically, we reserve the most significant Committee hearings/Exec. Action for the evening telecast, since most viewers are not able to watch television during the day. (Legislative Services converts 3-4 of the covered events to a video-stream that is accessible *LIVE* and in archived files on the Internet via the Legislative Branch home page.)

As project manager, I make programming selections one day ahead, based on published hearing schedules. We are pledged to cover each committee of the House and Senate respectively at least once during the Session; otherwise, we focus attention on bills that are generally regarded as significant and/or controversial. In past sessions, the House and Senate Tax and Education Committees were covered more often than others. More recently, much of the “action” is in the Judiciary Committees and the State Administration Committees.

We receive many requests and recommendations on which Committees to cover and telecast, from lobbyists, legislators, and legislative staff. On many occasions, and to the extent physical limitations in the production center allow\*, we accommodate the requests communicated from Senate and House Sergeants, who want to accommodate the public and ameliorate security concerns when hearing rooms are overflowing. When requests come from other parties, we *sometimes* make changes to the planned schedule. Our main concern and objective is to provide coverage of bills and proceedings of general interest to Montana citizens.

**Floor Sessions:** We cover every Floor Session of the House and Senate, transmitting one *LIVE* and the other on the same day, generally beginning at 6 PM. Typically, we toggle back and forth with respect to *LIVE* transmission; i.e., House Floor today and Senate Floor tomorrow, then House Floor again the day after tomorrow. We sometimes re-transmit selected Floor sessions on the subsequent weekend, especially joint sessions that feature orations from members of Montana’s Congressional delegation and presentations such as the State of the State, State of Indian Nations, State of Education; State of the Judiciary.

In summation, *Day-ahead planning* is based on knowledge, experience, and large volumes of both requested and unsolicited advice from legislators, legislative staff, executive branch officials, and lobbyists. Every day is a challenge: what to cover, when and how, e.g., *LIVE* vs. delayed telecasts; same day vs. weekend “spillover” programming. This decision matrix requires flexibility, adaptability, and consistency. We accommodate and respond to room changes, time changes, extended breaks, and real-time notices of conference committee meetings. We honor our commitment to cover every committee at least once every session, and we maintain consistent coverage of major legislation (budget related and stand-alone measures alike) throughout the process, from committee hearing to floor debate. This methodology—with HCTV staff at the helm of programming decisions—has worked well since the inception of TVMT.

**Interim Periods.** During the Interim, choices are less complicated. We cover every Interim Committee meeting conducted in the capitol. When there are multiple meetings on a given day (this occurs frequently), one of them—usually the one that starts first, e.g. at 8 am—is transmitted *LIVE* across the TVMT network, on cable channel 191. The other(s) are captured on a video server for telecast that same evening, generally at 6 PM. If there is a third (or fourth!) meeting, it is telecast on the next available day and/or evening, and again on weekends. Most meetings held in other cities--Billings, Bozeman, Sidney, etc.--are videotaped for subsequent telecast on TVMT. Virtually every Interim Committee meeting is shown on TVMT at least twice.

The cadence of the Interim is manifest in the calendar; Committee meetings come in waves, with multiple meetings in a given week followed by several weeks of relative inactivity. HCTV produces and imports a plentitude of non-legislative programming for transmission on TVMT. Some of this programming originates in the capitol, e.g., Governor's Press Conferences, other Executive Branch proceedings, events in the rotunda, while the rest is captured off-site, such as Oral Arguments at the State Supreme Court, and various conference and training events conducted at local hotels and other venues. (Further details about this mixture of mandatory and discretionary programming will be presented at the Feb. 9 Council meeting.)

## **II. Quality Control Measures.**

**Precision recordings.** Gavel to gavel coverage of proceedings is our stock in trade. Crisp and clean starts and stops for each event are our goal. We've never missed a substantive comment, vote, or testimony. However, we are not in control of critical component parts and parties in the system. We are dependent on the skills, discipline, and behavior of other people, as well as to the reliability of technologies involved in the production process. Examples: A number of committee chairs routinely or occasionally eschew use of the gavel. Committee secretaries sometimes get flustered with sound system operations, so the P.A. system is ON in the room, but we're not receiving the signal in the basement. Rostrum staff have control of sound in the House and Senate. Sometimes legislators forget to activate their microphones, or slouch away from them. Microphones break. Down in the submarine, sometimes character generation (graphics) software crashes. We make mistakes. These problems are inherent to a complex system. They are mitigated by good relationships and communication.

**Viewers' Experiences.** Power surges and outages happen, oftentimes after hours. These can cause broken links between video servers and the TVMT transmission to the cable signal. On occasion, Charter cable causes channel 191 to go dark, without prior warning or subsequent explanation. Signal quality is another issue. Signal quality is an ongoing issue. Digital conversion has led to some improvement

that is discernable on some but not all TV sets and computer monitors. TVMT is not yet carried on an HD cable channel.

Informing viewers with scheduling details is and always has been problematic. Committee meetings generally start on time, but they never end predictably. The same applies to floor sessions. (This is an inherent challenge in all states that telecast gavel-to-gavel proceedings.) During Interims, we are better able to craft and present what's coming on a given day, at what time. Moreover, a soon-to-be installed software will enable us to insert short clips at the interstices between long format proceedings, so that most programs can begin on the hour or half hour.

**Musical Interludes.** Some people are bemused by our collection of copyright free background music. The primary function is to prevent the public from hearing what is often political chit-chat among members and lobbyists prior to and following a committee meeting or a floor session. Music also helps us avoid “dead air” during breaks.

There was an occasion during the 2015 Legislative Session when the audio signal from the House sound system was inadvertently co-mingled with the music source. In other words, the music was embedded in the same signal coming from the rostrum. This required a technical work-around, and subsequent work by an AVI technician to decouple the signals. (We recall this occurrence as “the embedded audio incident”, and happily it has not happened again.)

**Accountability.** During Legislative Sessions, HCTV keeps a daily log of which committees are covered, which are LIVE and not LIVE, and the same goes for Floor sessions. During Interims, a comprehensive accounting of what is telecast on TVMT is readily accessible on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. The primary record is the Interim Calendar itself: we cover everything on it. The secondary source of programming information is a print-out from our programming computer, which shows everything we've shown that was not a LIVE transmission. Thirdly, the same daily log used during Sessions is now kept during the Interim.