

Binkley asks for comments on rural TV

by Sen. John Binkley
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — During the last legislative session, there was a lot of talk about the Rural Alaska Television Network.

OPINION

The network came on the air in 1977 as part of the Satellite Television Demonstration Project with an initial investment of \$1.5 million. It served 24 villages with a few hours of daily programming.

Today, RATNet reaches 248 villages and is on the air 18 hours a day with an annual operating cost of \$2.6 million. Because of the anticipated shortfall in state revenues, a number of legislators questioned whether we were getting the most for our money or whether we should be spending the money at all.

Besides simply discontinuing RATNet's funding, other ideas were to replace some or all of the state funding with user fees or turn over all the sites to local governments or nonprofit organizations.

Another idea was to have the state purchase the remaining small earth stations currently leased from Alascom. This would reduce the state's costs over the long term by eliminating the lease payments.

The other aspect of RATNet which received a lot of discussion was the type of program being broadcast. It was widely thought that some commercial programs should be replaced with educational programming.

This idea would not only save some money, it would also fit with the recommendations of the Senate Special Committee on School Performance. The committee had suggested that RATNet be used to bring more educational programming into the Bush, more in line with the old LearnAlaska network.

Two bills concerning RATNet were introduced last year, although neither one has passed. One would require at least one-half of the total programming on RATNet be educational, and at least one-half of the programs shown between 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. also would be educational.

The bill doesn't define educational programming so it would be up to the council to decide.

The other bill would establish the RATNet Council in law. It would still be made up of representatives from each of the 12 regional corporations, two statewide members appointed by the governor and the commissioner of the Department of Education, the president of the University of Alaska and the chairman of the Alaska Public Broadcasting Commission.

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Before taking any action on these ideas, it seemed pretty clear that we needed to have more information about the long-term effects, both on the state and on the network.

To help figure it out, intent language was included in this year's budget directing the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications to hold hearings in the communities served by RATNet and to review all the options put forward. The subcommittee, chaired by Rep. Red Boucher, D-Anchorage, is committed to sorting out the questions surrounding RATNet and is planning to study the issue as completely as possible.

That's where we come in.

Tell me what you think about RATNet. Should there be more educational programming, more news and programs about current events?

Should the council members serve a limited term, having a membership that rotates on a regular basis? Should we look at turning the local facilities over to the communities to maintain and operate?

Write to me at my Juneau office — Box V, Juneau 99811 — with your ideas.

Television can play a very important role in rural Alaska as a form of communication, entertainment and education.

Plus, telecommunications will be an

increasingly important technology in the future. Having an up-to-date statewide system will allow all Alaskans to participate. We need to make sure we're getting the most out of our telecommunications system and that it serves the needs of the people who depend on it.