



Michele Cardon/The Register

Channel 6 director Dave Kelly, left, checks the teleprompter for cameraman Ron Davy while Bill Reed, left, interviews Susan Jones-Helper.

Inside Huntington Beach

Local cable TV channel offers news, education, variety shows

By Brit Osgood
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It certainly isn't Hollywood. The studio -- a converted work room with makeshift lighting and a limited set -- is in the basement of the Huntington Beach City Hall. Crew and equipment are at a minimum and all the stars are volunteers.

But the shows produced there aren't intended for the big screen. They air on Channel 6, a cable television channel funded and operated by the Huntington Beach city government to keep residents informed about municipal activities.

Channel 6 was designed primarily for

emergency broadcasting but has gradually expanded its programming to include news, education and variety shows, said Bill Reed, city public-information officer and chairman of the Huntington Beach Public Television Corp.

"We want to draw viewers to Channel 6 because it's important for people to identify the channel as a place to turn for local news," Reed said. "I remember a few years ago when a fire in Santa Ana dropped a lot of ash in this city. The fire department ran a message on Channel 6 telling people why they had nothing to worry about and to please not call because the phone lines were tied up and emergency calls couldn't get through. In a real emergency, the problems would be multiplied."

The channel is part of Rogers Cablesystems which has served Huntington Beach, Fountain

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Valley, Stanton and Westminster since 1979. According to the franchise agreement, the system is governed by the Public Cable Television Authority which receives 5 percent of the subscription fees from the privately owned cable company and takes on the operating costs of several public channels, Reed said.

Those channels include one run by community colleges, a school-district station and a government-access channel, he said. PCTA is the coordinating center. It returns 3 percent of the subscription fees to the cities and uses the remaining 2 percent for cable expansion and exploration.

"Huntington Beach uses its share of the fees to develop the government-access channel — Channel 6," Reed said. "The city has about 60 percent of the subscribers in the system and receives about \$200,000 a year for the channel."

The city used the money to purchase television equipment and build a studio, Reed said. The first program to air regularly was the City Council meetings.

"Now we broadcast a variety of shows on a regular basis and occasional specials like the Fourth of July parade and the Miss Huntington Beach pageant," Reed said.

Regular shows are taped and aired twice a month and cover a wide range of topics. "Inside City Hall," hosted by Reed, takes an in-depth look at city projects. "Lollipop Locomotive" is a story hour for children taped at the Huntington Beach Library. "Seniors'

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Opportunities" is produced by, hosted by and about senior citizens "Lifestyle: Huntington Beach" goes on location to find people in the community who have interesting stories to tell.

"The purpose of a government-access channel is for the city to present its message to the public without being limited to just doing that," Reed said. "Very little that goes on in city hall should not be seen by the public. But my main concern with government-run television is that, as a propaganda machine, it defeats its own purpose. So we try to make sure that doesn't happen by offering a broad spectrum of shows."

One way to avoid getting too one-sided is a program called "Electronic Soapbox," Reed said. Residents may come into the studio and tape announcements or rebuttals to run between shows.

"It's our version of public-service announcements," Reed said. "People use our equipment to say what they want to say and basically aren't edited. It's a wonderful opportunity for groups that want to announce events."

The station is run by two full-time

producers and a playback assistant, Reed said. They are assisted by a number of part-time camera operators. Show hosts are volunteers who propose their ideas to the station.

"We need hosts — residents who have ideas and the capability to pull them off," Reed said. "We welcome those people with open arms, because we can't offer a lot of supervision."

Reed hopes to get more people involved with the station by starting a show which will give residents half an hour to demonstrate a topic such as tuning up a bicycle or cutting roses, he said.

"The idea is to give residents an opportunity to show off what they know best," Reed said. "We encourage people with ideas to come in and try them out. After all, this station is for the people of Huntington Beach."

Matt Liffreing is a Channel 6 host and producer. When he proposed interviewing all 21 of the City Council candidates, he received the station's approval.

"I wanted to give voters a chance to get to know all of the candidates," he said. "Nobody has ever done this type of program before. I interviewed each

of the candidates for 15 minutes and gave them the chance to have their say. Those interviews will be airing up until election day."

There aren't any Nielsen ratings for Channel 6, but Reed is sure people out there are watching the shows.

"We do know from verbal feedback that people are watching some of the shows and we're going to try polling them to see which ones they like best," Reed said. "But we're reluctant to spend the money without first identifying the best way of going about doing it."

Reed said City Council and Planning Commission shows are popular. "Since we started broadcasting them, attendance at the meetings has gone way down," he said. "Less people participate in the meetings and those who do give more organized, less-spontaneous presentations. After all, they don't want to look stupid on camera. People at home follow the meetings and call in with their responses."

Liffreing said people watch Channel 6 because the programs are consistent and of professional quality — something that isn't always seen on other local cable channels.

Reed said another reason people watch could be the high cable-penetration rate in Huntington Beach — 48 percent. Almost every other house in Huntington Beach has cable, he said.

"All the cities in PCTA have access to Channel 6, but since Huntington Beach has most of the viewers, it's pretty much been Huntington Beach shows," said Liffreing.