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Free TV test case feasible, report says

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Kamloops could serve as a national test case for free, over-the-air (OTA) TV amid Canada's all-out conversion to digital TV by 2011.

The pilot project is financially feasible and could even be profitable if a private broadcaster is willing to take the lead, according to a new study prepared for the Canadian **Media Guild**.

A digital technology called multiplexing, in which up to six TV signals can be broadcast through a single medium, is considered a viable alternative to paid services delivering 60 channels or more.

"What the research shows is that the cost is really doable for broadcasters," said Karen Wirsig, spokeswoman for the CMG. "If you look at multiplexing in Kamloops itself, it would cost all six broadcasters \$86,000."

The guild, working in collaboration with the local lobby group Save Our CBC Kamloops (SOCK), is hoping to convince a private broadcaster to seize the opportunity.

"Basically they said, technically, it's totally feasible and the CRTC is not a barrier to regulation. I think it's something Pattison (Broadcasting, owner of CFJC-TV) should think about in Kamloops."

Yet there are some major hitches in the proposal.

So far private broadcasters have shown no interest in maintaining OTA service after 2011 and the public is largely unaware of the significance of the looming conversion.

The significance?

Without an alternative to cable and satellite delivery of digital TV signals OTA viewers in the Kamloops area -- along with those in more than 900 mostly rural communities across the country -- will lose free TV service through the conversion.

Free TV as it currently exists would be available only in border areas from American sources.

Kamloops became a focal point for the study through lobbying by SOCK, which is collaborating with the CMG on pursuing the free TV option. The local group formed after the region lost free OTA CBC service when CFJC-TV disaffiliated from the public broadcaster two years ago.

Now the CMG and the local group hope to convince the local broadcaster to take the lead.

"People in the industry are interested but no one is willing to take the lead on it," Wirsig said. Both the CRTC, the industry regulator, and CBC have agreed the test-case proposal is feasible, she added.

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CRTC chairman Konrad Von Finckenstein may have sparked action when he said in June that digital TV is here to stay and industry had better get its house in order, she said.

"My great concern is that the industry will not be ready," he told a national gathering of broadcasters. "There will be requests for delays, and we will have a crisis on our hands. This must not be allowed to happen."

Rick Arnish, president of CFJC-TV and its parent, Jim Pattison Broadcasting, also sits on the digital transition committee of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters.

Though he hadn't seen the CMG report, Arnish suggested the cost figure cited for multiplex delivery is too low.

"The conventional TV industry is still trying to figure out why there should be over-the-air TV when only eight per cent of the market receives it now," Arnish said.

"At the end of the day there's not going to be any return on investment."

That hasn't prevented the U.S., which switches to all-out digital TV in six months, from proceeding with its test case in the small city of Wilmington, NC. There OTA viewers have been provided with converters for the nominal cost of \$20 each.

The converters will enable OTA viewers to receive a basic service of four local channels after the analogue cutoff in February.

Pam Astbury, a member of SOCK, is convinced that digital multiplexing offers a viable alternative.

"It's moderating the extremes in TV viewing between the 60-channel Americanized version and unplugging entirely," she said.

While OTA viewing currently makes up only a small fraction of the market, it could grow if a viable service of six channels was established.

"We're going to make this an election issue. I think we're at, really, the next turning point. We have a chance to raise awareness of the opportunity in Kamloops."

The next step nationally is to put the proposal on the public record during CRTC licence renewal hearings that take place next year for private and public broadcasters, Wirsig said.

"That is when broadcasters will be expected to detail their plans for the digital transition."

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Illustration:

• Photo: Mike Youds, Daily News / Pam Astbury is convinced that digital multiplexing offers a viable alternative.

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