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Advisory panel weighing complex UTOPIA facts

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C E N T E R V I L L E — Amid persistent criticism of U T O P I A , a committee charged with recommending which direction Centerville city will go on the network says it needs more time.

The city's UTOPIA Fiber Utility Advisory Committee reported Tuesday to the city council that it had not yet reached a recommendation as to whether the city should accept the Macquarie Capital proposal, which includes a \$300 million investment in the bond-indebted fiber optic network.

"We do not have a recommendation tonight," Dan Ditto, UTOPIA advisory committee chairman, told the council.

"UTOPIA is an extremely technical and complicated issue," Ditto said of the 11-member citizens committee that has been given the task of doing a nonpolitical "deep dive" to determine if the city should go with Macquarie's proposal. That proposal also would include a mandatory \$18 to \$20 a month service fee each household will be required to pay as part of its utility billings.

Currently, only about 30 percent of the households and businesses in Centerville subscribe to the highspeed Internet service.

There are accusations that Mayor Paul Cutler has indicated the city will ensure the UTOPIA Internet fee is paid by households through the threat of shutting off water to those households that don't pay it. The mayor denies making any such threat, but acknowledges that the way the city's utility fees are "bundled," citizens face water shutoff if they are short on their monthly utility bill.

Councilman Lawrence Wright told the Standard-Examiner that, through utility billings, the city could force residents to pay the UTOPIA fee. That being said, Wright does not appear to support a mandated fee.

"Why are we forcing a specific company on everyone else?" Wright said.

Ditto said his group is hoping to have some sort of recommendation to the Centerville City Council by its June 17 meeting.

"We are hoping to have a good set of viable facts," Ditto said of the charge the citizens committee has been given. "We believe this is what the citizens of Centerville will expect from us."

The committee could take an additional week and present its findings at a specially scheduled June 24 council meeting; Macquarie officials have given the 11 cities that make up UTOPIA a June 27 deadline to make a decision.

Macquarie officials have scheduled a 7:30 p.m. open house today at Centerville City Hall, 250 N. Main St., to answer any questions residents might have.

Under Macquarie's proposal, monthly billings would start in 30 months after Macquarie's \$300 million finishes the long-delayed buildout of UTOPIA.

Centerville is paying \$436,000 a year for its UTOPIA bonds. Larger cities pay more, such as Layton, with \$2 million a year.

Ditto said the 11-member committee has already received some basic information from Macquarie officials, and listened to the UTOPIA experts, in its attempt to flush out a "fair file of facts."

But while the city's fiber optic committee stopped far short of offering any type of recommendation, one Centerville resident was provided the opportunity at Tuesday's meeting for nearly an hour to take shots at what Macquarie is proposing, and how the city should be "digging in its heels" in resisting the present offer.

"Not every person needs high-speed Internet," Centerville resident George McEwan said.

McEwan, who drew applause from the 40 people still gathered at the meeting when he presented his information, said he also questions the ethics of a government arm, in this case Centerville, collecting fees for a private entity, Macquarie.

"From my own mind, it is time to get creative and do a reset," McEwan told the council.

"We can't jump off the cliff on this. We have already done it twice," McEwan said of previous commitments the city has made to UTOPIA.

UTOPIA has been controversial for years. Begun in the late 1990s as a faster Internet alternative to commercial service, completion of the network has stalled, while the 11 city members that make up UTOPIA pay off their UTOPIA bonds with tax revenue instead of subscriber fees.

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