



## Our Viewpoint

# The art of negotiation

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**N**egotiating can be difficult, especially when it is with a monopoly.

Seeking concessions from the only business in a position to provide a basic service does not create a strong negotiating position.

But that is precisely the challenge facing cities such as St. Charles, Geneva and South Elgin as they continue talks with cable television provider Comcast.

Comcast negotiates a contract with municipalities. The contracts often are referred to as franchise agreements. Comcast seeks the use of the municipalities' right of way so their cable lines can hang from utility poles and connect with homes.

In return, municipalities often seek assurances that customer service needs will be met. Standards that regulate everything from response to outages to additional public access channels are fair game during negotiations.

But the basic problem municipalities face is that television has evolved into a

basic need, much like water and electricity. As such, when the cable television goes on the fritz, the customer's wrath is as likely to be directed at the municipalities as much as it is the cable provider.

And with fewer options available, companies such as Comcast are in an enviable position.

Really, what could a city say while sitting at the negotiating table? "This is our last, best and final offer. Take it or shut off all of the televisions."

It will not happen.

In fact, 95 percent of all markets in the nation have no competition.

There is, however, small measures residents can take.

Understand Comcast, not your city officials, control the television.

Understand that when you are not pleased with your service, you should contact Comcast. Then, contact your city as well so officials can keep track of the complaints. The number of complaints and the types of complaints can help cities, at least in a small way, at the negotiating table.