

**Florida League of Cities
Cities of Excellence
City Spirit Award**

Name: Fort Walton Beach Television (FWBTV)
Jurisdiction: City of Fort Walton Beach

In April 2007, a new era of government-resident relations kicked-off in the City of Fort Walton Beach. On April 2, 2007, Fort Walton Beach Television (FWBTV) was born. FWBTV is Northwest Florida's first and only government run, government access channel. FWBTV broadcasts programming produced by the City of Fort Walton Beach and other state and nationally produced programming 24-hours a day, 7-days a week. Programming includes spotlight shows on the City's various departments, special events, disaster preparedness and much more. The addition of this new channel allows the City to become more transparent to residents. Viewers get an inside look at all the departments and various meetings of the City. It adds a degree of honesty and integrity by offering citizens access to their local government like never before.

When the City of Fort Walton Beach was renegotiating its cable franchise rights with Cox Communications in 2005, City leaders knew it was time to take a step forward in providing better communication with citizens. The City is located in southern Okaloosa County, right between two television media markets for news coverage, the Mobile, Alabama/Pensacola market and the Panama City market. Due to this location, television media coverage of local government issues is not the same as is enjoyed by many other communities across the state. To alleviate this, the City knew a full time television

channel dedicated to the City of Fort Walton Beach would keep the public more informed about City issues. Through negotiations with Cox Communications, the City was able to acquire a digital television channel on Cox's basic digital service and a \$50,000 grant for equipment.

Since its inception, FWBTv has had a remarkable impact on the community. Live broadcasts of City Council Meetings allow residents to follow what is happening at City Hall from their own television. In addition to Council meetings and workshops, FWBTv also broadcasts Municipal Planning Board (MPB) and Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) meetings allowing citizens who are unable to attend meetings the opportunity to still take part in various aspects of city government.

Along with meetings, FWBTv highlights departments/divisions and special events in the City. The first program to highlight a City division, *History and Heritage*, profiles the City's Heritage Park and Cultural Center. Viewers are treated to an inside look at Heritage Park's three museums and the history behind the artifacts housed in the museums.

Other spotlight programs have highlighted the City's Utilities Department, Police Department, Purchasing Department, Information Technology Department, Human Resources Department and more.

Several special events have also been broadcast on FWBTV. In 2007 and 2008, FWBTV televised the Fort Walton Beach Police Department's Peace Officers' Memorial Ceremony which pays tribute to the police officers who lost their lives in the line of duty over the last year. Other programs include the 2007 City of Fort Walton Beach Christmas Parade, *Be Prepared*, a guide to hurricane preparedness hosted by the Fort Walton Beach Fire Department, and the 2007 Year in Review, a look back at all the major accomplishments of the City of Fort Walton Beach in 2007.

Another highlight for FWBTV came in early 2008, when the channel did its first ever remote broadcast at the 2007 AVT \$25,000 Women's Challenger Tennis Tournament at the Fort Walton Beach Tennis Center. Public Information Officer, Cam Johnson, and the City's resident tennis player, Budget and Grants Manager, Charlotte Dunworth, provided play-by-play and color analysis for the doubles' and singles' finals.

While government run television channels are more common in the southern portions of Florida, the City of Fort Walton Beach has paved the way for this type of citizen education/information in Northwest Florida. The channel is the only one of its type in the panhandle, which includes larger municipalities such as Pensacola and Tallahassee.

One of the more impressive aspects of FWBTV comes from the monetary side of the channel. During these tight budget times, it is important that this type of service is offered at little or no cost to taxpayers. The City was able to successfully purchase all the equipment necessary for broadcast, including robotic cameras and other equipment

needed to do a live broadcast, for a little over \$25,000 dollars. This is only half of the \$50,000 grant received from Cox Communications. Some other communities in the state spent upwards of \$100,000 for consultants, equipment and installation. City employees researched, purchased and installed the equipment in house, a great savings to the City. In addition, FWBTV is run by the City's Public Information Officer, with support from the Information Technology Department and did not require the hiring of new personnel.

FWBTV is now the talk of the town in Fort Walton Beach. You can often hear residents at local restaurants discussing what they saw during a meeting, or what program was on the night before. In early 2008, the City of Fort Walton Beach and FWBTV received the *Innovation in Communication and Technology Award* for populations of 20,000-50,000 from the Florida City County Management Association (FCCMA).

FWBTV has proven to be a success in a community that needed more coverage of government events, programs and meetings. Residents are now able to follow what is happening at City Hall and become more involved with their government. In 2005, City leaders knew a television channel was the best way to keep residents informed, but what has transpired surpassed their wildest dreams. The City of Fort Walton Beach continues to be a leader among municipalities; and the region as a whole, and Fort Walton Beach Television is just one example of that leadership. For all these reasons, FWBTV deserves the Florida League of Cities *City Spirit Award*.