

RPV gets high-tech with Internet site

Ability to replay council meetings could be first for South Bay city

By Nick Green
STAFF WRITER (September 17, 2001)

Want to savor the latest public spat between Rancho Palos Verdes City Council members over and over again?

Or simply need to get some sleep without missing a discussion of a particularly crucial issue during a meeting that droned on until almost midnight?

Now Internet users can.

In what appears to be a high-tech first for a South Bay city, it's possible to watch archived video from council and Planning Commission meetings stored on the city's Web site.

Viewers may sit through an entire meeting or simply fast forward or rewind to the desired part of the meeting.

"Instead of six hours of drivel you can hear just one hour of drivel," said Councilman Doug Stern, who has championed increased municipal use of e-mail and other technology to enhance public participation in local government. "People are really using the technology and . . . we're making it available on their schedule, not ours."

No other South Bay city Web sites offer such a service, although Torrance and Los Angeles stream live video and audio of council meetings over the Internet, a service Rancho Palos Verdes does not offer.

"This is pretty unique, we're very proud of it," said Ted Vegvari, who runs the nonprofit group Palos Verdes on the Net, which hosts the Web sites of Lomita and all four cities on the Peninsula. "Even cities much larger than Rancho Palos Verdes aren't doing streaming.... We have a very progressive city"

Rancho Palos Verdes appears to be one of just a handful of California cities to offer such a resource.

Even tech-savvy San Jose, which streams live government meetings over the Internet, does not archive them for later viewing; people have to rent or buy the videos.

Bakersfield has seven government meetings archived.

Davis, a college town near Sacramento where an estimated 85 percent of residents have Internet access, has archived local government meetings since last October. But the cities offer only the last three months of meetings on their Web site, while Rancho Palos Verdes intends to make available a comprehensive virtual library dating back months.

The city already has 13 council and Planning Commission meetings in its data base dating back to March, as well as a couple of public service announcements.

“We've been going through a test phase for nearly a year,” said Finance Director Dennis McLean, who doubles as the city's information technology coordinator. “It's taken a little bit to get there, but we're there.”

Every council and Planning Commission meeting is now expected to be available within two business days of its conclusion.

A low-tech, laborious process needed to record the meetings accounts for the time lag. “For us to convert a six-hour tape takes us about 16 hours of copy time and if there's a glitch we have to start the recording all over again,” Vegvari said, adding that poor transmission quality does not allow the meeting to be recorded as it's under way.

Although the organization has the contract to design and run the city's Web site, the archiving is performed at no charge using volunteers, he said.

The archive may be extended to other Peninsula cities if they show an interest and volunteers – more are always needed – are available, Vegvari said.

High-speed Internet access isn't necessary; a 56K modem is the minimum requirement. People must also install special video software, which is available for free and instructions for obtaining it are on the Web site.

Few residents are aware of the resource yet.

Even local government watchdog John Freeman hadn't heard of the archive until the *Daily Breeze* sought comment.

But although the picture was small and the technical quality a little shaky, Freeman was simply pleased he may no longer have to videotape the meetings.

“It's viewable,” he said. “The more information we get out, the better it is.”

To access the archive: www.palosverdes.com/rpv/video/Index.cfm.