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WEIU-TV Awaits BOT Approval Before Continuing Digital Conversion Project

Nov-16-2004

Two years ago, WEIU-TV began its conversion to digital television, beginning with its production and master control facilities.

Soon, if Eastern Illinois University's Board of Trustees gives its expected go-ahead, the process will continue with the acquisition of land and the installation of a 492-foot tower and transmitter.

Trustees are scheduled to meet at 1 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 18, in the Grand Ballroom, located in the Martin Luther King Jr. University Union. The public is invited to attend.

It was in 1998 that the Federal Communications Commission mandated that all full-power television stations in the nation be required to acquire the ability to broadcast digitally, thereby eventually eliminating analog broadcasting. To aid in the process, the state of Illinois awarded all PBS licensees in Illinois \$2.4 million to be applied toward the conversion.

WEIU-TV chose to begin its conversion "inside-out," converting production and master control facilities before the transmission portion. That first phase was implemented in Summer 2002.

Conversion of the station's existing tower and transmitter proved to be more difficult.

Due to the technical properties of broadcasting in analog on channel 51 and digitally on WEIU-TV's assigned channel 50, both channels needed to be co-located. Unfortunately, the station's current tower, located on Eastern's campus, was not capable of meeting this need.

An existing 600-foot tower, owned by Mediacom Communications, Inc., promised to be the answer to WEIU's problem, but three days before the sale of land and tower was to be finalized, Mediacom withdrew from the deal for strictly internal reasons. A second site was selected and optioned, but that site was rejected by the Federal Aviation Administration.

Trustees are now being asked to consider a contract for the purchase of a third site -- 9.4 acres of land near Humboldt, Ill. - at a cost of \$4,480 per acre. The site, which is immediately adjacent to an existing 492-foot tower, has already been approved by the FAA.

The state funding mentioned earlier was awarded with time restrictions; therefore, it was spent on the already-completed internal conversion and a mobile digital production system WEIU uses to train students in televising EIU football and basketball games.

However, WEIU has existing grant and local funding of approximately \$1 million available for additional conversion expenses, plus an additional \$500,000 grant that has awarded specifically for the purchase of a transmitter. Station officials believe these resources will more than pay for the estimated \$1.2 million it will cost for the land, engineering, site upgrades, transmitter, antenna, transmission line, studio-transmitter links, test equipment and monitoring systems needed to complete WEIU-TV's digital conversion.

Eastern's trustees also will consider building an addition to the east side of Lantz Arena, thereby adding space for the men and women's basketball coaching offices and associated academic classroom and study spaces. The scope of the \$875,000 project includes the design of an addition approximately 30 feet wide and 156 feet long, and would include plumbing, mechanical, electrical, fire alarm systems, interior design, furnishings and any associated items pertaining to the coaching and academic aspects of the space.

If approved, it is anticipated that construction would begin during the summer of 2005 and be completed by the beginning of the Spring 2006 semester.