

VIDWEST FILMMAKERS PROJECT

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Dear City Council Members:

I would like to provide an update on Vidwest's work to reopen Columbia Access Television. With the 2021 budget recently proposed by the City Manager's office, the fate of CAT once again remains an open question. I hope that City leaders see the long-term value in a public media center for Columbia residents and work with Vidwest to keep this resource in our community.

Vidwest has had to delay the reopening of CAT to keep our staff and patrons safe. We want to open the media center with our community partners as soon as its practical to do so.

There is great interest in streaming technology at the moment and providing a livestreaming service fits squarely within CAT's mission to create media access for Columbia residents. Within a month of building our rig, Vidwest has helped Access Arts host a virtual fundraiser from its Columbia-based studio. The livestream has received more than a 1,000 views from supporters of this venerable, 50 year old arts organization.

Students will soon return to our City, and they may have limited access to school resources to continue their education. As an independent nonprofit Vidwest can provide equipment and expertise to support their studies. We are reaching out to educators to learn how we can support them during this unprecedented school year.

These examples are a few ways that community media is important during this pandemic. For your consideration I am attaching a 3 year proposal that will guide CAT to a more sustainable model less dependent on City funds. The plan is for consideration for the current budget year and was developed with feedback from the City Manager's office.

Thank you for your time. If I can be of service, please let me know.

Best,
Matt Schacht
Vidwest



John Glascock
City Manager, City of Columbia
701 E. Broadway
2nd Floor, City Hall Building
Columbia, Mo 65205

July 20, 2020

Re: 3 year proposal for CAT

Mr. Glascock:

Please accept the attached proposal for consideration of including CAT in the 2020/2021 City budget.

Sincerely,

Matt Schacht
Vidwest
President of the Board
29 S. 9th St, Suite 206
Columbia, Mo 65201

Columbia Access Television: 3 year plan

1. Introduction

The goal of this proposal is to outline a 3 year plan between the media nonprofit Vidwest and the City of Columbia to make Columbia Access Television (CAT) financially independent from City funding.¹ The plan calls for continued City funding of CAT for three years until CAT is able to generate sufficient revenue to cover essential expenses (rent, utilities, software licenses etc).

The benefits of preserving CAT for our community are manifold. CAT provides a center for media education and skill development in video-related fields for any individual who wants to better themselves. The availability of CAT's production services, especially in the time of Covid-19, supports the City, small businesses and other nonprofits with media production expertise. Civic programming, local commercials (which supports local video production) and livestreaming events are a few of the valuable services available at CAT. CAT also serves as a production center for residents to exercise their First Amendment rights through video and film production.

While the benefits of CAT are plentiful, the single most important factor to survival of an organization is a successful business model. Respecting this lesson, we believe that Columbia Access Television's future rests in creating a robust and reliable revenue stream to support its public service programs.

¹ CAT is a privately run media center and public access TV station, historically supported by City funds.

2. History

Over the past two decades four grassroots media organizations have helped make Columbia a hub for video content makers. These organizations are Columbia Media Resource Alliance, the Ragtag Film Society, Columbia Access Television and, most recently, Vidwest.

In June 2000 a loose collective of filmmakers, educators and entrepreneurs formed the Columbia Media Resource Alliance (CMRA) “to provide a support structure for local filmmakers and videomakers.”² CMRA’s members envisioned different, mutually beneficial arms of a media support structure for Columbia residents. These alternative visions led them to form two nonprofits.

In 2003 CMRA members formed the Ragtag Film Society (RFS). RFS operates Ragtag Cinema and the True False Film Festival, two commercially-successful, beloved icons in Columbia’s arts scene. For fiscal year 2017, the most recent tax filings available online, RFS reported nearly \$3 million in total revenue.³

The second nonprofit formed by CMRA members was Columbia Access Television (CAT). Formed in 2004, CAT’s mission was to provide the general public with media tools and education to produce high quality digital videos and cinema.⁴ Unlike RFS, CAT’s founding members envisioned a public media center and television station eternally funded by cable franchise fees collected by the City of Columbia. In 2009 CAT funding was \$200,000 per year to operate a public media center and public access television station. In 2019 CAT had the same responsibilities with a \$35,000 annual budget.

Many factors played a role in the gradual defunding and dissolution of CAT, including a drop in City sales tax revenue, new communication technologies that shifted media makers to online distribution, and overall waning public support for

² “Small Steps, Slowly.” A select history of Public Access Television in Columbia, MO, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/192wcMjmbfWoE03dyHhq6EUqZK9Db0OFU/view?usp=sharing> (accessed July 5, 2020).

³ Ragtag Film Society Form 990, https://apps.irs.gov/pub/epostcard/cor/043770411_201806_990_2019080916556976.pdf (accessed July 5, 2020).

⁴ Columbia Access Television By Laws, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IFqKZe9eZaBl8XMNbr4iSgvc5wZkdcgX/edit> (accessed July 5, 2020)

a public access television channel. At a 2015 City Council meeting where CAT's budget was a topic of discussion, a resident stated, "I would rather have a police car going through my neighborhood at night, rather than watching some silly movie."⁵

CAT dissolved as a nonprofit on September 30, 2019 due to lack of funding. A few weeks later, the City of Columbia distributed a request for proposals to run Columbia Access Television for one year. Vidwest, a newly formed nonprofit with a mission to promote digital media making and cinema in Missouri, was the only organization that applied to the RFP. A month later the Council approved the contract with Vidwest to restart Columbia Access Television.

⁵ "Columbia Access Television remains in contract with Columbia," KOMU, Sept 22, 2015, <https://www.komu.com/videos/columbia-access-television-funding-remains-in-contract-with-columbia> (accessed online July 5, 2020)..

3. A Sustainable Model

Every organization knows the importance of a balanced budget. For Vidwest the dilemma is how to provide a low-cost service (where no Columbia resident is excluded) and remain solvent without significant City funding for CAT. Attorney Sue Buske, the “godmother” of public access television channels across the country, who for decades has helped municipalities and their public access channels create sustainable, long-term arrangements, says that there is no single path to preserving a public access channel and community media center. Every community’s solution to the question of funding is different.⁶

CAT currently offers several types of annual memberships.⁷ Historically, membership fees have not been a significant source of revenue.⁸ Maintaining a low-barrier-to-entry means CAT must continue to offer low-cost memberships while developing other sources of revenue. Here’s a short list of cost-cutting measures and revenue generating strategies for CAT over the next three years:

A) *Radically reduce personnel and staff costs.* At one time CAT employed several full-time staff, including an executive director. At the present budget of \$35,000 Vidwest employs no full-time staff for CAT. A couple of technical positions have contract labor (e.g. studio construction and website development). However, the majority of CAT’s work is done by volunteers. Future paid positions can be built out of revenue generating opportunities (e.g. teaching positions that support fee-based workshops).

B) *Allow CAT’s cable TV station to phase out.* At the present CAT foresees spending around \$7,000 (20% of its current budget) to install a fiber connection from it’s media center to Mediacom’s head channel (which is how CAT programming is distributed on cable TV). This expense represents a fraction of the ongoing expenses that CAT anticipates year after year to keep the public

⁶ Phone conversation with Sue Buske Fall 2019. Some of the solutions she shared for funding for public media included cable franchise fees, local production services, and government funded community programming. Membership fees and donations

⁷ CAT Membership form, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1czDGNcullZu2crOqU3rYBbjRNViZlbp/view?usp=sharing> (accessed July 6, 2020)

⁸ Taking an average of CAT’s membership numbers over the past 14 years, membership fees accounted for \$5,000 to \$6,000 per year at most.

access TV station operational. While the notion of a public access channel can inspire a kind of pre-internet nostalgia (a golden era of locally made programs like Mr. Rogers Neighborhood), the reality is that most Columbia residents can share and watch content online with free platforms like youtube, vimeo and social media. The significance of a public access channel for public discourse has diminished. Shifting to online distribution may be a necessary step for CAT as the costs to maintain the public access channel exceed CAT's resources and public support for public access TV wanes.

C) Create revenue generating services and events. This strategy includes a gamut of entrepreneurial ideas ranging from CAT offering a commercial livestream service, to fee-based media workshops and event hosting at CAT's media space. A livestreaming service is already taking shape.⁹ Vidwest is currently in discussion with clients about possible contracts in 2020 and 2021 for a state-wide conference and a university commencement.

It's important to note that Covid-19 is and will continue to have an impact on the demand for services that require large groups of people indoors. Until issues of public health can be addressed, CAT's only source of outside revenue may be remote-based services (e.g. livestreaming and other production work).

D) Seek grants. Vidwest is eligible to apply for service and arts grants for CAT. In the past year Vidwest applied for two grants (one national and one local, neither of which was accepted). The gamble of grants, along with the opportunity costs of seeking them, is less than ideal for an organization run by mostly volunteers and with no full time staff. However, identifying high-reward grants and consistently applying will be part of a successful fundraising strategy for CAT.

⁹ On July 16, 2020 CAT announced it's livestream service to the public via Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/columbiaaccessstv/videos/910331742782930> (accessed on July 20, 2020)

4. Proposal

We believe CAT has a lot to offer Columbia residents in terms of education, media tools and community. Our proposal is a 3 year plan with the City of Columbia to rebuild the media center so it can support its service work with revenue generating programs.¹⁰

The path to financial stability for CAT includes continued City funding for three years at \$35,000 per year. The goal at the conclusion of three years (2023) is for CAT to meet “essential costs” on its own, at which point, the City can reduce its funding of CAT. Essential costs are defined as those, without which, CAT would go dark.

CAT Annual Budget (3 year plan)			
ITEM	COST PER MONTH	ANNUAL COST	Essential Costs
Rent and utilities*	\$900.00	10800	TRUE
Staff (\$15 p/h, 7 hours per/day, 2 days per/week, 52 weeks per year)	N/A	10920	FALSE
Office supplies	N/A	\$600.00	FALSE
Insurance (liability, gear, cablecasters, ommissions)	N/A	\$4,000.00	TRUE
Marketing materials (online, print etc)	N/A	\$500.00	FALSE
Security System	\$20	\$240.00	TRUE
Adobe CC subscriptions (4)	N/A	\$1,440.00	TRUE
Gear repair and maintenance	N/A	\$3,000.00	TRUE
Emergency Funds (10%)	N/A	\$3,500.00	FALSE
TOTAL		35000	19480

¹⁰ The three year plan keeps CAT at \$35,000 per year with City Funding. By the end of year 3 Vidwest aims to break even on its operational expenses for CAT (rent, utilities, insurance, labor etc). By year 4 CAT does not require City funding for daily expenses. Sample budget: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1X0DoLwOW-UbsJCwbiL62dXgQs6iU33taYX5c8SOb1wE/edit?usp=sharing>

Here is a year-by-year outline:

YEAR 0 (present): Vidwest transitions CAT to a new space, builds studios and sets up infrastructure for revenue generating programs.¹¹ Instead of Covid-19 shutting down CAT, the down time will be used to create internal improvements. Core volunteers are identified and offered roles at the media center. Many CAT expenses reflect one-time transition costs.

YEAR 1 (2020/2021): Vidwest opens CAT to the public. Efforts begin to develop commercial services (livestreaming).¹² New grants are sought ([Missouri Arts Council Grant](#), [Community Foundation of Central Missouri](#) and [Como Gives](#)). Physical services are limited by Covid-19. Core volunteers practice and experiment with programming. \$7,000 annual revenue target.

YEAR 2 (2021/2022): Vidwest continues to develop commercial services. Safety precautions for Covid-19 are the new normal. Vidwest engages with the public about the media needs of the community. The goal for CAT is to provide tools and services most needed by vulnerable and high-potential groups (students, small businesses, social groups, nonprofits and low-income residents). Core volunteers teach new volunteers. More revenue is generated than the previous year. \$14,000 annual revenue target.

YEAR 3 (2022/2023): Vidwest offers well-developed commercial services with repeat clients. Covid-19 precautions are part of regular life. Vidwest builds community through group-related activities and events for CAT (whether in-person or online). Core volunteers seek fresh faces for operational roles. CAT breaks even on essential expenses. \$20,000 annual revenue target.¹³

¹¹ Vidwest hopes to relocate CAT to a space with another media arts nonprofits, e.g. The True False Film Festival or KOPN radio. Sharing a space divides overhead costs and creates synergy between organizations.

¹² Vidwest is currently in negotiation with 4 local organizations to provide livestreaming services for concerts, graduations, fundraising auctions and professional conferences. While we believe demand for a livestreaming service will be integral to supporting CAT's financial independence, the changing nature of the market and economy makes it difficult to project a business model at this time. We are in the process of talking to clients and assessing their needs and resources so that we can form a more precise budget.

¹³ Essential expenses for CAT include rent, utilities, insurance, equipment maintenance, security system and Adobe license subscriptions (totaling \$19,490). See proposed budget: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1X0DoLwOW-UbsJCwbiL62dXgQs6iU33taYX5c8SOb1wE/edit?usp=sharing> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

5. Summary

Over 20 years ago the seeds for what would become CAT were planted by Columbia's civic leaders. With continued support from the community, CAT will continue to be a resource for every resident of Columbia. In these times of pandemic, economic upheaval and civic unrest the mission of CAT to provide media services, education and a voice for residents is more important than ever. We humbly submit our proposal to the City of Columbia for the 2021 budget.

"I encourage each of you, when you see something in our community that needs to be changed, when you see a challenge our city is facing, or when you just see something in Columbia that could be a little bit better...ask yourself, what is my talent [and] what is my treasure?" - Mayor Treece, June 16, 2018

To:

City of Columbia
701 E Broadway
P.O. Box 6015
Columbia, MO 65205

From:

Vidwest
c/o Matthew Schacht
29 S. 9th St, Suite 206
Columbia, Mo 65201

RE: Notes for August 17, 2020 Council meeting

Columbia Access Television: A year in review

2020 has been a difficult year for Columbia, Missouri. As council members you are familiar with the economic and public health hardships Columbia residents have experienced over the past several months. You also see clearly the new challenges our community faces in the upcoming year.

An abbreviated record of Vidwest's operation of CAT, this document has two purposes: one goal is to provide an overview of activity at Columbia Access Television under Vidwest's stewardship over the past 12 months (August 2019 to August 2020), and the second goal is to offer various funding scenarios for CAT for fiscal year 2020 / 2021. In light of the tough decisions that must be made in the City budget, funding scenarios for CAT range from \$35,000 to \$0.

Timeline August 2019 to August 2020:

August 2019 - The City of Columbia creates an RFP seeking a new organization to operate Columbia Access Television for one year. Vidwest submits a proposal.

Sept 2019 - The original nonprofit Columbia Access Television dissolves. Vidwest assumes temporary responsibility for CAT's equipment until the RFP is decided.

Oct 2019 - The City accepts Vidwest's bid to run CAT. Vidwest and the Ragtag Film Society begin negotiations for a shared space on the Business Loop.

Nov 2019 - Vidwest receives funds from the City (approximately \$35,000). RFS continues negotiating a lease with their landlord at 1600 Business Loop East.

Jan 2020 - RFS signs lease with their landlord. Vidwest moves CAT gear into 1600 Business Loop East. All CAT studio construction and improvements are planned for after the True False Film Festival.

March 2020 - Covid-19 strikes Columbia. City shuts down. Vidwest postpones work on media center space. Vidwest's meeting with John Glascock to discuss the 2020 budget is postponed.

April 2020 - Foreseeing a rising public demand for a livestream service, Vidwest begins purchasing livestream equipment for its community media center.

May 2020 - Missouri remains closed. Vidwest staff and volunteers are encouraged to remain home. The livestream rig is assembled at a CAT member's residence.

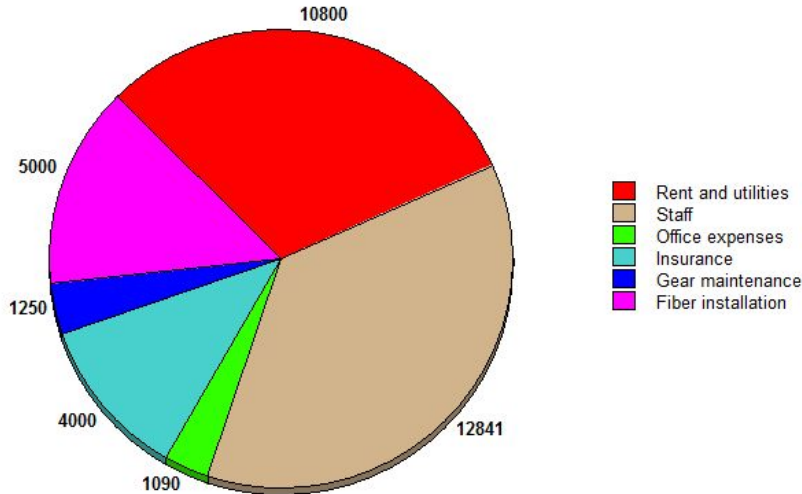
June 2020 - Missouri officially reopens. CAT volunteers begin building a new studio space. The Ragtag Film Society requests Vidwest postpone reopening the media center due to Covid liability. Vidwest meets with John Glascock to discuss the 2020 budget. Mr. Glascock requests a 3 year funding plan. CAT hosts its first livestream on social media ever.

July 2020 - Vidwest organizes a livestream for a virtual fundraising event for Access Arts, which receives over 1,000 views. CAT's 3 year funding plan is delivered to Mr. Glascock, but it arrives too late to make it into the 2020 budget.

August 2020 - Vidwest submits its Year in Review update to the City at the August 17th City Council meeting.

Finances, prospective vs actual:

Original RFP budget (dollars)



Finance highlights (comparison):

- **RED**: Rent renegotiated with RFS due to Covid-19 (slightly less than budgeted).

- **BROWN**: Staff expenses reduced because of Covid-19.

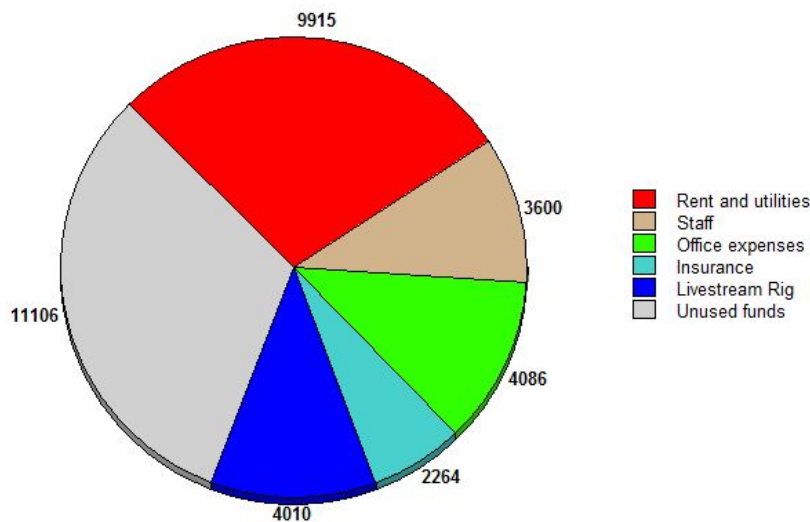
- **GREEN**: Office expenses increase for space construction.

- **TEAL**: Insurance slightly less than originally budgeted.

- **BLUE**: Gear funds increased to purchase a livestream rig.

- **PURPLE**: Fiber for TV broadcast not installed. After discussions with City staff, the importance of maintaining a Public Access Channel in question.

Current finances August 2020 (dollars)



- **GRAY**: Remaining funds available to cover insurance, utilities and some rent for 2020 / 2021.

Budget scenarios for CAT 2020 / 2021:

<i>A) \$35,000 + renewal of equipment lease</i>
Vidwest can hire part-time staff for fiscal year 2020 / 2021 to maintain equipment, oversee rentals, manage studio space (when re-opening is practical) and begin community development plans for fundraising, plus manage all of the expenses / activities in the options below. A 3 year plan for making CAT self-sustainable, delivered to the City in July, is based on this budget. ¹
<i>B) \$15,000 + renewal of equipment lease</i>
Vidwest can pay for insurance, utilities and rent for CAT for fiscal year 2020 / 2021 at it's shared space with RFS.
<i>C) \$5,000 + renewal of equipment lease</i>
Vidwest can pay for insurance and some utilities for fiscal year 2020 / 2021 at its shared space with RFS. RFS will be accountable for a greater portion of the rent in the shared space.
<i>D) \$0 + renewal of equipment lease</i>
Vidwest can muster experienced volunteers to provide some programming and equipment rentals to the public. Entrepreneurial efforts to develop a business model around commercial rentals and a livestream service will be explored.

¹ Link to CAT 3 year plan:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UL9XuVfvzJ2C2g_PpmNLxhnJY5eK22y0/view?usp=sharing (accessed on 8.16.20)