

Editor: Cynthia S. Paris
(804) 649-6801
oped@timesdispatch.com

Op/Ed

inRich.com
Keyword: opinion

DTV

Are You Ready For Feb. 17 Transition?

WASHINGTON

The clock is now ticking — loudly — on the final countdown to the nation's digital television transition. In 79 days, your over-the-air TV may be useless to you unless you act today. On Feb. 17, 2009, federal law re-



ROBERT McDOWELL

quires most stations broadcast only the new digital signals. Will you be ready?

Digital television, TV's biggest technological leap since its invention, delivers crisper pictures, better sound, and more free programming channels for consumers. In fact, many Americans already enjoy the benefits of DTV because most stations have broadcast both analog and digital signals for several years.

Thanks to the growing number of news stories and promotional campaigns, most Americans — up to 92 percent by recent estimates — know that something called the "DTV transi-

tion" is going to happen soon. Yet as I've traveled the country in recent weeks to promote DTV readiness, I've learned that many Americans still aren't sure what they must do to prepare for it.

If you are one of the approximately 12 percent of Americans nationwide who use only antennas (set-top "rabbit ears" or rooftop hardware), rather than cable or satellite TV, to receive local television signals, you will need to take a few steps to make sure the TVs in your household are ready. As a member of the Federal Communications Commission, I strongly encourage everyone to join the government and media industry to help those most at risk of being left behind when the change comes: the elderly, the infirm, low-income individuals, and non-English speakers.

These are the people who need to get the DTV message — and act upon it — today. So let me convey a few simple points, and ask you to relay them to anyone who may seem uncertain about what is happening:

■ If you have a TV set that was built before 2002 and uses an antenna, you have two options: (1) buy an inexpensive digital converter box and connect it to your existing analog set, or (2) buy a new, more expensive TV that has a built-in digital tuner. (TVs that are hooked up to cable or satellite TV will continue to function, and most TV sets manufactured after 2002 already have digital tuners built into them. If your newer TV says "digital ready" or "ATSC" on it, you're all set.)

DTV data

FCC Commissioner Robert McDowell welcomes the opportunity to answer questions about the Feb. 17 transition and how Richmonders can prepare for it.

When: Today, 3 p.m.

Where: Virginia State Capitol, 910 Capitol St., House Room 3

DTV Transition at a Glance

Congress in 2006 set the Feb. 19, 2009, deadline for the transition. It did so not just because DTV provided such improvements for television, but because DTV technology uses less spectrum. That makes room in the old TV spectrum band for new wireless technologies, such as wireless broadband access to the Internet. It also frees up spectrum that can be devoted to new public safety uses.

If your TV set was built before 2002, it probably is an old analog receiver. You can use it after Feb. 17 to receive local television signals but only if the set is hooked up to cable, satellite TV (in most cases), or a digital converter box.

If your DTV converter-box coupons have expired, you will not be allowed to apply for new ones. You are free, however, to ask a friend or neighbor who doesn't need coupons to apply for them and then turn them over to you.

If you subscribe to cable or satellite TV but have one or more analog television sets that rely on an antenna, you'll have to acquire a converter box for each such set that you want to use after Feb. 17.

If you need to acquire a converter box, look for one labeled "analog pass-through." Such boxes will allow your television set to continue to receive certain "low power" TV stations, which often provide foreign-language or religious programming. These stations will not have to convert to digital operations for several years yet, so many

will continue broadcasting in the analog mode after Feb. 17.

If you're hearing about new "digital cable" or "digital satellite" boxes, don't confuse those messages with talk about DTV converter boxes for the digital broadcast television transition. It's easy to get confused, unfortunately, because many cable operators and satellite providers are upgrading their own multichannel systems to digital technology now, too. (They're doing it for the same basic reason: to take advantage of digital technology's ability to pack more channels, and better pictures and sound, into a smaller amount of bandwidth.) But the cable and satellite digital upgrades have nothing to do with the Feb. 17 DTV transition — and if you are a cable or satellite subscriber, you do *not* need to upgrade to digital service in order to continue receiving your local broadcast channels through cable or satellite systems.

If you are a satellite TV subscriber in a smaller market, your provider may not retransmit your local broadcast signals through its satellite system. If so, you are no different from any over-the-air subscriber and so must take additional steps to continue receiving your local stations. Check with your satellite provider if you have any questions.

If you are a tech-savvy type, please offer *now* to help others — especially your family, friends, or neighbors in those at-risk groups — acquire and connect their converter boxes and, if necessary, adjust their antennas.

■ If you need to acquire a digital converter box for an analog set, buy it *today*. These simple electronic devices work with antennas to translate digital broadcast signals into a language that old analog sets can understand. The cheapest boxes cost about \$40, the same price as the coupons Congress has subsidized to help Americans make the transition. The boxes are widely available in electronics stores.

■ Once you get a converter box, hook it up to your TV set *immediately*. You may need to adjust your antenna to pick up the digital signals, and you

definitely will have to "scan" the new channels into the device for it to work properly. If you have problems receiving signals, call 1-888-CALL-FCC or check the Web at www.DTV.gov.

■ If you need help to pay for a DTV converter box, apply for the government coupon *today*. Each household may acquire up to two coupons. To apply, call 1-888-DTV-2009 or check the Web at www.DTV2009.gov. And as soon as you receive your coupon, run — don't walk — to a store to buy a box. Those coupons expire within 90 days.

■ If you do not need the government

subsidy to buy a converter box, don't bother. It isn't a permission slip; you're free to purchase a box whenever you wish. It takes weeks for the government to process coupon requests — and in the meantime, you're losing precious time to hook up the box, check your antenna connections, and start enjoying free digital broadcast TV right away.

In short, don't wait until Feb. 17 to get ready for DTV. Act today, and help others do the same.

• Robert McDowell is a commissioner with the Federal Communications Commission.