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Call for funds to help community TV go digital

By **MATTHEW RICKETSON**

COMMUNITY television will die unless the Federal Government supports its transition to digital transmission, a Government-controlled parliamentary committee has found.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts has tabled a report recommending the Government require the successful bidder for the proposed new digital service, Channel A, set aside broadcasting spectrum for the community television sector.

Community TV station Channel 31, which runs in four cities including Melbourne and attracts 1.3 million viewers monthly, broadcasts in analog and cannot be seen once viewers switch to digital TV.

The latest figures from Digital Broadcasting Australia are for the end of last year and show that about 25 per cent of Australian households have digital television.

Commercial TV networks, the

ABC and SBS simulcast in analog and digital.

Committee chairwoman Jackie Kelly, a NSW Liberal MP, said community TV was extremely valuable.

"The sector is the incubator of diverse and innovative programming and is essentially the training ground for the commercial and national broadcasters," she said, pointing to performers such as triple Gold Logie award-winning presenter Rove McManus, who began his career on Channel 31.

The committee's unanimous report called on the Government to provide \$6 million to help community TV convert to digital, and to provide \$1.7 million yearly until the simulcast period ends, probably in 2012.

Without such support community TV would have to start all over again in 2012, Ms Kelly said.

A spokeswoman for Communications Minister Helen Coonan said the minister welcomed the report and would consider its recommendations before the federal budget in May.

two bouncers a year later.

But the jury heard that mobile phone records indicated Holmes was in Melbourne's northern suburbs at the time of the brawl.

Holmes, 33, has pleaded not guilty to two counts of perjury.

The trial, before Judge Jennifer Coate, continues today.

POKER MACHINES

Macedon shire appeals

THE only pub in Romsey is soon to be at the centre of a Supreme Court battle over gambling.

Macedon Ranges Shire council will challenge a decision by the president of the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, Justice

Stuart Morris, to allow 30 machines at the hotel, despite overwhelming local opposition. The council will mount a Supreme Court challenge after Justice Morris overturned the Victorian Commission for Gambling Regulation's rejection of machines at the hotel.

Cr John Connor said it was unfair that ratepayers should have to pay, for what could be a very expensive legal appeal, but it reflected the council and community's steadfast opposition to pokies in their area.

APPOINTMENT

New health chief

THE obesity epidemic, alcoholism and mental health are the new issues confronting Todd Harper, who will step down as the head of VicHealth to become chief executive of VicHealth.

"VicHealth is ideally placed to be leading a lot of those initiatives," said Mr Harper, who takes up the new role on April 16.

While health promotion and disease prevention would remain at the core of VicHealth's strategies, Mr Harper said the organisation would also focus on how to deliver savings to the healthcare system.

Victorian Health Minister Bronwyn Pike said a "worldwide search" had been conducted to replace Dr Rob Moodie, who has led VicHealth from 1998. "It is gratifying to know the most suitable candidate was already working close by," she said.

EXCLUSIVE BRETHREN

MP denies message

LIBERAL senator Bill Heffernan has denied that he was told by Prime Minister John Howard to spread a message that Liberal MPs should shun help from the Exclusive Brethren.

The Age reported on Saturday that Liberal MPs had been given the message, through Senator Heffernan, not to accept help or donations from the Exclusive Brethren.

But Senator Heffernan told The Age: "I have never had a discussion with the Prime Minister about the Brethren."

He said that like most Liberal members of parliament, he had met Exclusive Brethren representatives, but that he took no notice of what they said because they did not vote.

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