Action by the Bedford Township Board four years ago is threatening to create a rift between the township and Bedford Public Schools.

There's no animosity between the township's two most powerful governments, but everyone expected to address the issue — the township's decision not to pass a portion of cable franchise monies on to the schools — said even discussing the matter could make trouble.

"I've always been a strong supporter of our schools," said Supervisor Walt Wilburn, who, in his second year in office, is finding his cablevision advisory committee's recommendation to repay $60,000 to Bedford Public Schools his most controversial issue yet.

"Without the schools you really have nothing," he said, after a two-hour meeting last week between township trustees, school officials and current and past members of the cablevision committee.

That meeting was the third between members of each faction over whether the township owes back payments to the schools because of an agreement reached among the panel, township and schools in the late 1990s.

The cablevision panel — a group of local citizens charged with overseeing the township's contract with Buckeye Cable Co. — learned late last year that the township stopped sharing its 4 percent franchise fee with the schools.

"People don't understand that the franchise fee is not money paid by Buckeye Cable, " said Gene Stock, an advisory panel member. "People pay that 4 percent fee in addition to their cable bill. Buckeye collects the money and passes it on to Bedford Township."

Each year those fees generate about $190,000, according to township and cable officials.

"The township can use those monies unrestricted," Stock said. "They can use it for whatever they want."

Currently, the township puts the money into the general fund. That much of the matter is clear.

What is unclear is exactly how the schools are supposed to benefit — or if they even should.

Part of the contract agreements with Buckeye was that the cable provider would, rather than deal with two governments, pass its franchise fees onto the township and the township would pass some of that onto the schools, according to cablevision committee members.

The agreement was set up so that the schools would get $20,000 — $10,000 from the cable company and $10,000 from the township — each year from the 4 percent fee collection. The money would help fund the school's broadcasting program.

That money was paid to the schools from 1999 to 2002.

It was a previous township board that halted those payments. Some trustees and township officials claim that part of that agreement was that the broadcasting program would air township board meetings regularly on local public access television.

After a year of making payments without any students televisualizing the meetings — apparently the result of scheduling conflicts with students — township officials in August, 2002, hired Triple "L" Productions of Lambertville to televisualize the public meetings and stopped paying the schools.

The cable committee charged with oversight of the matter didn't recognize the missed payments until last year.

Stock and Sigmund Geremski were the only two of the six-member cable committee to be reappointed in January — just weeks after the panel publicly announced the missing $60,000 in payments.

Wilburn claims not re-appointing the others — including longtime panel Chairman Steve Lennex — is only to see CABLE, Page 95