

Cable franchise cut to 20 years

By STEVE SHENDER

A committee of City Council members negotiating a new franchise with Sonic Cable TV has decided to keep the cable company on a shorter lease than originally proposed. Mayor Ann Soldo said today that the committee, which has yet to present its recommendations to the full council, has decided to grant Sonic a 20-year franchise rather than the 30-year contract which nearly received council approval in April.

The mayor serves on the council cable committee with council members Rex Clark and Frank Osmer. Mrs. Soldo, Clark, Osmer, City Manager John Radin and City Attorney Don Haile met two weeks ago with local Sonic manager Les Johnson and company president Chris Cohan to discuss the franchise. Radin said today that the meeting was called on short notice after it was learned that Cohan would be coming through Watsonville.

The city manager was reluctant to discuss details of the evolving franchise agreement this morning, but Mrs. Soldo

said that the committee had opted for a 20-year contract, renegotiable every five years, instead of the 30-year franchise with 10-year negotiating intervals originally considered by the council last spring.

The move to shorten the life of Sonic's new franchise agreement appeared to be a concession to critics who argued that 30 years was too long. The length of the proposed contract was a major concern of cable subscribers who testified at a public hearing conducted by the council in June. At that time, a number of persons warned that the city could lock itself into an outmoded system if it agreed to a 30-year contract term in an industry where technology changes rapidly. Sonic's previous agreement with the city, which expired last November, was for 20 years.

At the hearing in June, Haile said that the council's initial move to grant Sonic a 30-year franchise was a "policy decision" influenced by Sonic's need to secure financing for equipment purchases.

Mrs. Soldo indicated that few,

if any, of the other concerns expressed by those who spoke at the June hearing were addressed by the council committee. She said the committee did not consider the question of "public access" (non-professional, locally produced) programming "in depth." Nor did she indicate that the committee had given much weight to calls for more Spanish- and Japanese-language programming or to proposals that action on the cable franchise be delayed until after a citizens committee could be formed to study the matter and make its own recommendations.

"As we went over the comments (at the hearing), we felt that most dealt with disorder in the cable," the mayor said. "People were more concerned with the reception and (were) asking to improve it."

Radin indicated today that it would be several weeks before the revised cable ordinance is brought back to the City Council. The city and the company, he and City Attorney Haile said, remain at odds over language in the franchise itself and a so-

called "enabling ordinance" which sets forth procedures for the granting and revoking of cable franchises by the council.

The city manager said he did not want to discuss the issues dividing city officials and the cable company in detail "until we get all our facts together" because "everybody is wound up and it could blow up in our faces.

"As far as I'm concerned," said Radin, "we don't have anything to bring back to the council as yet."

Mrs. Soldo said today that Sonic officials are concerned about language in the enabling ordinance which provides for arbitration in the case of a dispute between the company and the city. The enabling ordinance, she said, provides that the city may terminate the franchise at any time if the council finds that Sonic has failed to comply with its "material provisions" and failed to take steps to correct problems arising from such non-compliance.

Sonic's Johnson could not be reached for comment this morning.