

Move afoot to block award of cable-TV franchise in SC

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There were hints Tuesday of a move to block the award of a Santa Cruz city cable television franchise by a referendum.

The idea of a ballot measure was raised during a public hearing conducted by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors. At the end of the hearing the board voted to award the county franchise to the Greater Santa Cruz Cable Television Associates.

Tom Karwin, a Santa Cruz cable-television consultant, told the supervisors, "There is a very good chance people will challenge the decision by a public referendum."

The Santa Cruz city charter allows city ordinances to be challenged by popular referendum.

Karwin said later he is part of a group planning to circulate petitions challenging the city ordinance which grants the franchise. He wouldn't identify other members of the group. He said he believed enough signatures could be collected to put the cable issue up to a vote by city residents next year.

He said the effect of a referendum, if passed, would "screw up" the county's franchise award as well.

Karwin said the point of the referendum would be to delay a final decision on the lucrative cable franchise until litigation is finished with Group W, the current cable provider.

Group W's franchise expired July 1 but the company filed suit in federal court claiming the exclusive right to continue as the franchise holder.

The city and county have worked together to grant cable-television franchise rights. On Sept. 22, the Santa Cruz City Council and the county board of supervisors announced their intent to award the franchise to the Associates, following the recommendation of a city-county staff group. The group that came in second, Cable Co-op of Greater Santa Cruz, has said the decision was short-sighted.

Final votes by both governmental bodies are scheduled for Tuesday.

Santa Cruz City Manager Dick Wilson said because the city's award was in the form of an ordinance and the charter does allow an ordinance to be challenged by an initiative, Karwin and his group could conceivably block the award.

Karwin was a consultant to the city-county cable planning

group early in the process more than two years ago. He conducted a survey and study of the public's needs and desires for cable television.

Though not a member of the Cable Co-op of Greater Santa Cruz, Karwin said he thinks the Co-op's plan is better. He told the supervisors during Tuesday's 20-minute public hearing he thought they had abandoned their goal of protecting cable subscribers.

Other members of the Co-op criticized the supervisors and the Associates' cable proposal during Tuesday's public hearing.

Margaret Brezel, Co-op's vice president, said the Associates' plan for rate protection "is a sham" because it is linked to state averages for cable service. As rates go up throughout the state, local rates would rise as well, she said.