

What's on TV?

Static, ghosts and not enough, some say

By SOPHIA TRIPODES
STAFF WRITER

The Watsonville City Council is trying to figure out what it can do about complaints that the local cable television franchise holder provides poor reception and programming and charges too much.

The City Council will officially hear complaints about the franchise holder, Sonic Cable, at a public hearing at City Hall Tuesday night.

In addition to charges that Sonic channels go blank, that static

sound interrupts programs, and that the company offers too little Hispanic and Japanese programming, the council expects to hear complaints that the cable company charges higher rates than the United Artist system serving other parts of Santa Cruz County.

But the city's authority to get involved in the cable dispute is limited, even though Sonic has a franchise with the city to operate. Under federal deregulation laws, and a 20-year agreement with Sonic that was signed in 1983, the city has almost no control over

cable rates and limited control over Sonic's quality and management.

Watsonville Councilman Parr Eves, who proposed the public hearing, hopes the council will approve the formation of an advisory committee to communicate relevant complaints to the cable company.

But Sonic can do nothing about many of the complaints, Les Johnson, Sonic's general manager, said. For example, he said, complaints that TV screens go blank

during cable programs should not be aimed at Sonic because they are caused by power outages Sonic can't control.

Interference is "almost always because we have a power failure," and "we've had a severe case of power problems," he said. Sonic lost a San Francisco station earlier this week because of power failures in Santa Clara, Johnson said.

Even with some backup power, Sonic can't compensate for all power outages, Johnson said.

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TV

Comparing three cable television offerings

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"It's one of those things that has to be tolerated," based on today's technologies, he said.

Sonic's marketing manager, Richard Popchak, admitted that some reception problems could be solved, such as the static sound that interrupts dialogue, and "ghosting," when the images from one channel overlap another.

"In an ideal situation every channel would be perfect always," Popchak said.

He said Sonic tries to keep problems of ghosting and static to a minimum by responding immediately to complaints.

Some Sonic customers have also complained that the cable system doesn't offer enough Spanish-language programs. Sonic offers only one Spanish channel because it has only two to choose from, Johnson said. Sonic offers what

Popchak calls the "ABC or CBS" of Spanish television, Channel 48, and dropped the only other Spanish-language channel that residents don't get over regular television, Galavision, after customers said they didn't like the all-news format.

"We are basically offering what is available," Johnson said.

Others criticize Sonic for running almost no Japanese or other Asian programs. Currently, Sonic offers an international channel that includes Japanese programs on the weekends in place of the VH-1 channel. When Sonic decided to air the Japanese programs on Fridays and Saturdays, other customers complained they were missing VH-1's weekend lineup.

The adage "You get what you pay for" doesn't necessarily apply to cable television.

Residents of Santa Cruz County, with the exception of Watsonville and Capitola, are getting a new and improved cable system, and they're getting it for less.

United Artists Cable has already started installing the revamped system and will offer customers almost twice as many stations as Watsonville's cable, for three dol-

lars less a month than Watsonville viewers pay.

UA may, however, raise its basic rate to \$16.95 after the first year, and steadily after that.

Falcon (serving north San Benito County, South Santa Clara County, Aromas and Castroville) charges \$27.95 for 26 channels; Sonic (serving Watsonville and Capitola) offers 28 channels for \$17.50; and UA, when the new system is in place, will run 50 channels for \$13.50.

Under their basic packages, all three systems offer several San Francisco stations, CNN news, Nickelodeon and MTV. In addition, UA offers an extra PBS station and Bravo, a movie channel featuring foreign films.

A deluxe package, including HBO, other movie and sports channels, and the basic channels,

runs for \$50.95 a month with Falcon, \$61.15 with Sonic, and \$36.95 with UA.

Sonic offers more Spanish-language programming than either Falcon or UA. There are only two Spanish-language channels that viewers can't get without cable. Sonic carries the Spanish channel 48, the one most in demand. Falcon has plans to offer the other channel, Galavision.

Although UA offers little in the way of Spanish-language programming, it airs KTSF, an international channel, that has programs in a variety of languages including Japanese, Chinese and Korean. Sonic carries KTSF but only runs it on the weekends.

What UA offers is "tremendous and unique" not just in this area, but in the country, said Sonic's general manager, Les Johnson.

—Sophia Tripodes

"You can't win," Popchak said.

Furthermore, Sonic representatives said their company isn't charging exorbitant rates. Sonic charges \$17.50 for 28 channels. That cost is more expensive than UA cable, which serves Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley and unincorporated areas in Midcounty, but is less than Falcon cable, which serves North San Benito County, South Santa Clara County, Aromas and Castroville.

After Tuesday's hearing, it could take weeks before the City Council determines exactly what power it has, if any, to negotiate complaints with Sonic, Eves said.

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Falcon Cable TV

(North Monterey County)

Basic service

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| 2 KTVU-Oakland (2) | IND |
| 3 KICU-San Jose (36) | IND |
| 4 KRON-San Francisco (4) | NBC |
| 5 KPIX-San Francisco (5) | CBS |
| 6 KSBW-Salinas (8) | NBC |
| 7 KGO-San Francisco (7) | ABC |
| 8 KCBA-Salinas (35) | IND |
| 9 KQED-San Francisco (9) | PBS |
| 10 KMST-Monterey (46) | CBS |
| 11 KBHK-San Francisco | IND |
| 12 KNTV-San Jose (11) | ABC |
| 13 KSMS-Salinas (67) | IND |
| 15 KTEH-San Jose (54) | PBS |
| 27 TBS | |
| 33 Nashville Network | |
| 34 Community Info. Chan. | |
| 35 CNN | |
| 36 QVC (shopping) | |

Basic service ... \$17.95

Music & Sports..... \$5

- | |
|------------------------------|
| 23 ESPN |
| 24 MTV |
| 25 Turner Network Television |
| 26 USA Network |

Family & Variety..... \$5

- | |
|------------------------------|
| 28 The Discovery Channel |
| 30 Nickelodeon |
| 31 Arts & Entertainment Net. |
| 32 The Family Channel |

Premium Services

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------|
| 15 Playboy..... | \$10.50 |
| 16 Movie Channel..... | \$10.50 |
| 17 Disney..... | \$10.50 |
| 18 Showtime..... | \$10.50 |
| 20 Cinemax..... | \$10.50 |
| 21 HBO..... | \$10.50 |

Total Cost

Falcon offers a variety of packages between \$24.95 and \$50.95 per month. Basic service plus all other available channels adds up to \$90.95 a month.

United Artists Cable

Santa Cruz County

(new system)

Basic service

- | | | | |
|----------------------------|-----|---------------------------------|-----|
| 2 KTVU-Oakland (2) | IND | 3 KRUZ/TRAVEL-Local | |
| 4 KRON-San Fran. (4) | NBC | 5 KPIX-San Fran. (5) | CBS |
| 6 TNT | | 7 KGO-San Fran. (7) | ABC |
| 8 KSBW-Salinas (8) | NBC | 9 KQED-San Fran. (9) | PBS |
| 10 KMST-Monterey (46) | CBS | 11 KNTV-San Jose (11) | ABC |
| 12 KBHK-San Fran. (44) | IND | 13 KICU-San Jose (36) | IND |
| 14 KOFY-San Fran. (20) | IND | 15 KCBA-Salinas (35) | IND |
| 16 MTV | | 17 The Nashville Network (TNN) | |
| 18 Video Hits One (VH-1) | | 19 KTSF-San Fran. (26) | IND |
| 20 KSMS-Salinas (67) | IND | 22 ESPN | |
| 23 USA | | 24 CNN | |
| 25 CNN-Headline News | | 26 C-SPAN | |
| 27 C-SPAN II | | 28 Financial News Network (FNN) | |
| 29 CNBC | | 30 The Discovery Channel | |
| 31 Lifetime | | 32 Arts & Entertainment | |
| 33 Bravo | | 34 Nostalgia | |
| 35 WTBS | | 36 WGN | |
| 37 Prevue Guide | | 38 The Weather Channel | |
| 39 The Family Channel | | 40 Nickelodeon | |
| 41 Learning Channel | | 42 The QVC Network (Shopping) | |
| 43 Eternal Word TV Network | | 44 Vision (VISN) | |
| 45 Customer Information | | 46 Entertainment TV | |
| 51 Future Use | | 52 Future Use | |
| 53 Future Use | | 59 KQEC-San Fran. (32) | PBS |
| 60 KCSM-San Mateo (60) | PBS | 61 KTEH-San Jose (54) | PBS |
| 62 Public Access | | 63 Public Access | |
| 64 Public Access | | | |

Basic Service..... \$13.50

Premium Services

- | | | | |
|------------------|---------|----------------|---------|
| 47 Showtime..... | \$13.95 | 47 Disney..... | \$13.95 |
| 49 Cinemax..... | \$13.95 | 50 HBO..... | \$10.95 |

Full package (Basic and Premium)..... \$36.95

Pay per View

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------|
| 54 Request I | 55 Request II |
| 56 Playboy | 57 Tuxedo |
| 58 Special Events | |

Prices set for each event or viewing

Sonic Cable TV

(Watsonville
and Capitola)

Basic service

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| 2 KTVU-Oakland (2) | IND |
| 3 KICU-San Jose (36) | IND |
| 4 KRON-San Francisco (4) | NBC |
| 5 KPIX-San Francisco (5) | CBS |
| 6 KSBW-Salinas (8) | NBC |
| 7 KGO-San Francisco (7) | ABC |
| 8 KSMS (67) | IND |
| (Watsonville only) | |
| 8 Capitola Comm. Channel | |
| (Capitola only) | |
| 9 KQED-San Francisco (9) | PBS |
| 10 KMST-Monterey (46) | CBS |
| 11 KTEH-San Jose | PBS |
| 12 KNTV-San Jose (11) | ABC |
| 13 KBHK-San Fran. (44) | IND |
| 15 KCBA-Salinas (35) | IND |
| 18 KSTS-San Jose (48) | IND |
| 19 Special Events, etc. | |
| 20 Home Shopping Network | |

Basic service \$16

Expanded Basic

- | |
|------------------------------|
| 24 Superstation TBS |
| 25 Turner Network Television |
| 26 USA Network |
| 27 The Discovery Channel |
| 28 Arts & Entertainment Net. |
| 29 VH-1 |
| 30 The Family Channel |
| 31 CNN |
| 33 MTV |
| 34 Nickelodeon |
| 35 ESPN |
| 36 Eternal Word TV Network |

Extended service. \$1.50

Premium Services

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------|
| 14 Showtime..... | \$8.95 |
| 17 The Movie Channel ... | \$8.95 |
| 21 Cinemax..... | \$8.95 |
| 22 HBO..... | \$8.95 |
| 23 The Disney Channel .. | \$7.95 |

Total Cost.. \$61.25
(all channels)

United Artists Cable

Santa Cruz County

(current)

Basic Service

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------|
| 2 KTVU (2) | IND |
| 3 MNST (46) | CBS |
| 4 KRON (4) | NBC |
| 5 KPIX/KRUZ (5) | CBS/Local |
| 6 KSBW (8) | NBC |
| 7 KGO (7) | ABC |
| 8 ESPN | |
| 9 KQED (9) | PBS |
| 10 KNTV (11) | ABC |
| 11 CNN | |
| 12 KBHK (44) | IND |
| 13 KICU (36) | IND |
| 20 ESPN | |
| 22 CNN | |

Basic Service..... \$7.14

Premium Services

- | | |
|------------------|------|
| 21 SHOWTIME..... | \$10 |
|------------------|------|

Ref. Paj. 8-14-90