

Council hears cable TV gripes

By STEVE SHENDER

Watsonville City Council members held a hearing on cable TV at E.A. Hall School Tuesday night and got an earful of complaints and suggestions from cable subscribers, who asked them to think twice before granting Sonic Cable TV a 30-year franchise.

About 45 persons showed up at the hearing, and slightly fewer than half of them testified; all but two were critical of the proposed franchise, which came close to approval by the council in April. Council members, who are expected to take some sort of action on the cable issue at their regular meeting next Tuesday, heard from educators, community activists and rank-and-file cable subscribers, who told them that:

—The proposed 30-year franchise term is too long.

—They should delay any

action until after a citizens committee can be formed. The committee, backers said, would consider the whole cable issue and make recommendations to the council regarding the nature and quality of service which should be required of Sonic under a new contract.

—The council should require Sonic to provide facilities for "public access" broadcasting (non-professional, locally produced programming).

—Sonic should be required to provide more Spanish- and Japanese-language programming.

Council members were urged Tuesday night not to tie the city into a 30-year "marriage" with Sonic because of the rapidly changing "state of the art" in computer and telecommunications technology.

"Cable has changed radically over the last 15 years. There may be other changes over the

next 15," Sam Ackerman told the council. "Possibly, Sonic would not be bound contractually to improve (their system under a 30-year franchise)," he said.

"We have concern about a 30-year contract," said Dr. Francis Tomosawa, speaking for the Japanese Citizens League. "Technology is changing radically. In 10 years it could change so much that the people of Watsonville may want something (new), and if they're stuck with a 30-year contract, they may not get it."

Tomosawa said that if the council was bent on granting the cable firm a 30-year contract, it should get "some commitment in writing, not only a verbal commitment," that Sonic would continually upgrade its system to keep pace with technological advances. He also proposed formation of a

citizens committee, "so people (can) have input" in the cable matter. "I don't think all the things the people of Watsonville are thinking about can be passed on to you in one night," he said.

The Watsonville optometrist said he had spoken with Sonic manager Les Johnson about two years ago on the issue of Japanese-language programming, and had received assurances that more programs in Japanese would soon be added to local cable service. "We would like some commitment so we don't wait forever for something Sonic says they will do and don't carry out," Tomosawa said.

Carmen Lopez, who addressed the council in Spanish, said that more Spanish-language programming is needed.

"TV is almost the unique medium of information and entertainment for me and my

children," she said, speaking through a volunteer interpreter. "It could be a very beneficial medium of information, education and communication — *muy rico*," she said.

"We need a channel in Spanish," said Mrs. Lopez, who criticized the city for failing to print a recently circulated cable TV survey in both English and Spanish.

"I got the questionnaire, but it was only in English," she said, "and I don't know English."

Mrs. Lopez and others in the audience urged the council to require Sonic to provide a "public access" channel and to provide a studio in Watsonville for local TV productions. "We want a channel for public access," she said. "We want this very much. It's in your hands."

Pam Pullman, "chairperson" of the Pajaro Valley Unified

School District Staff Development Committee, told council members that a public access channel would be of great use to the schools. "Students could do teleconferencing," she said. "They could communicate without leaving their classrooms."

"The community would benefit from locally significant programs such as English as a second language, citizenship, and agricultural practices," she said.

Peter Brown, of Open Channel, which operates a public access channel in Capitola, told the council that Sonic should be required to purchase equipment for a TV production studio in Watsonville. Brown said survey results had shown that "probably you have a very high percentage of people wanting local

(Continued on page 12)

(Continued from page 1)
programming." (About half the people who answered a question about public access TV said they supported the idea. About 20 percent of those returning the questionnaires did not answer the question at all.)

Support for public access television also came from Dolores Cruz Gomez, director of the Salud Para la Gente medical clinic. She told the council that such a channel could be used to air locally produced, "health-oriented" educational programs that would be "very useful to the community."

Ms. Gomez also told the council that the city's failure to send the questionnaires out in both Spanish and English smacked of latent "racism."

City Attorney Don Haile told the hearing audience that the council's initial move to grant Sonic a 30-year franchise was a "policy decision," influenced by Sonic's need to secure bank financing for equipment pur-

chases. He subsequently explained that it might be more difficult for the firm to borrow whatever money it may need to upgrade its facilities in the future if its contract with the city were limited to a lesser duration. Sonic's previous franchise, which expired last fall, was for 20 years.

Haile indicated after the hearing that concerns about Sonic's ability or willingness to keep up with changing technology under the proposed 30-year franchise contract were unwarranted. He said that under the proposed contract, Sonic's franchise would be subject to review every 10 years — at which time the city and the cable firm would attempt to reach "mutual agreement" on changes needed to modernize the system. If the city and Sonic could not agree, Haile said, "state-of-the-art" disputes would be settled by an arbitrator.

"When it comes to the state-of-the-art question," said Haile,

"you have to look at it (the franchise) on a 10-year basis."

Responding to comments about Spanish- and Japanese-language programming, Sonic manager Johnson noted Tuesday night that the firm currently carries Channel 35, a Spanish-language station based in Salinas, and offers Galavision, a pay channel with Spanish programming. He said that the firm hopes to add six hours of Japanese-language programming every Sunday within about 90 days.

"We offer more for the money than any cable system in the surrounding area," Johnson told the audience Tuesday evening.

Howard Ditlevsen, a former city councilman, was one of the few speakers who accepted that assessment of Sonic's service.

"I think they (Sonic) are doing a splendid job," Ditlevsen told the council. "After hearing what I've heard this evening, I think I'd ask for a 50-year contract," he said.