

Sonic proposes revamping of local service

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WATSONVILLE — Sonic Cable TV is proposing to install a new, state-of-the-art cable system that would be capable of carrying 105 channels, including three public access channels.

In return, the company wants a 15-year franchise.

Sonic and city officials, members of Watsonville's Cable TV Committee, and several residents met Thursday night to discuss a proposal by Sonic to replace the present cable network with a revamped system that would be carried on fiber optics. Sonic is anticipating spending between \$2 to \$3 million on the new system if a new franchise is awarded.

John Adams, Sonic manager, said the company would like to get

a 15-year franchise with Watsonville and Capitola. The present franchise with the city runs out in 2004. The 15-year franchise would begin when and if approved by the city, not added on in 2004.

At Thursday night's meeting, Adams outlined some of the new system's features, but a written proposal will not be ready until Aug. 1.

The new system would act as a "platform" capable of accommodating emerging cable technology, Adams said. About two years after installation, the system could carry as many as 105 channels, he said.

Immediately after installation, customers would have a system comparable or better than TCI

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Cablevision, which serves Santa Cruz and outlying areas. TCI now offers about 78 channels, Sonic about 35 channels.

The method of distributing the cable signal would also be different. Under the present system, the signal is delivered to all homes at the same time on one line. If there is a problem somewhere along the line, the whole system is affected.

With the new system, the signal would branch out to "nodes," which are made up of 500 homes. Cable problems could be confined to a certain node instead of that problem disrupting service to all homes.

The new system would also have a central location where Sonic would receive and distribute all signals, Adams said. Currently, Sonic has signal reception facilities in Santa Clara, San Jose, the Santa Cruz mountains, and Watsonville. Fixing problems would be easier and faster, Adams said.

With all the channel capabilities, the new system would reserve three for public access, Adams said. Those channels would be reserved for education, government, and general public use.

"There will be a dramatic improvement in service," Adams said.

John Burdick, a member of the committee, said Watsonville has heard this promise before.

"Sonic has said a lot of things in the past and nothing has happened," Burdick said.

There are still a lot of questions Sonic has to answer, Burdick said, before the city and the committee can begin to consider a new contract with Sonic.

The city is looking at other cable companies, Burdick said. Pacific Bell, for example, will soon offer cable service to the San Jose area.

Competition among cable companies has intensified in recent years. Newer, cheaper technologies, such as the 18-inch satellite dish by RCA that cost under \$1,000, are also emerging.

"They have to stay competitive if they want to stay in the market," Burdick said.

Assistant City Manager Gary Smith said Sonic's spotty service and low customer satisfaction continues to be a major problem. Customers complain that their concerns are not adequately addressed by Sonic. Sonic disagrees.

To get a clearer picture of the problems, Sonic and the committee will conduct a survey of Sonic customers. The survey, Smith said, would start soon.

The committee will meet Aug. 7 at 5:30 p.m. at City Hall, and another meeting will be held Aug. 17, also at 5:30 p.m. at City Hall.

A larger public meeting that will invite people from Watsonville, Capitola, and other areas throughout the county will be held August 23 at 7 p.m. at Aptos High School.