

## Local news

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# Cable TV New deal with Sonic Cable on the horizon

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CAPITOLA — Cable TV viewers alert: Your frustrations with Sonic Cable may be coming to an end.

The cities of Capitola and Watsonville are closing in on an agreement with Sonic that would improve reception with a new fiber-optic system, double the number of channels and improve customer service. The changes will be phased in over 29 months as soon as the agreement is finalized.

Given a history of complaints about bad service, poor signal quality, bad management and a lack of responsiveness to customers, the changes will come none too soon.

"I think this is our chance to make a difference," said Capitola City Manager Susan Westman. "I know there's a large sentiment out

there; people think we shouldn't deal with Sonic. They're so angry and frustrated they don't want to see them continue. But unfortunately, the only viable option is to work out an agreement with Sonic that gives us what we want to have. The opportunity of having another company coming in is quite remote."

Five years of pressure from customers and the cities' cable television committees may finally be paying off with an enforceable contract that should give customers some relief. The new agreement includes a customer service bill of rights, with penalties for failure to respond.

"What we are looking for are guarantees about system upgrade, guarantees about customer service, guarantees that if we are extremely dissatisfied we have a

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mechanism to deal with it," said Westman, who plans to present an agreement to the City Council on Feb. 27. Watsonville's franchise agreement should go before its council in early March.

The new system will cost a little more — an estimated 20 cents a month on top of the current basic rate of \$23.43 — but customers should be able to relax and choose from a minimum of 60 channels, compared to the fewer than 30 now

available. The company will be installing an entire new fiber-optic system at a cost of \$7 million — up from the \$3 to \$4 million originally estimated.

"Watsonville's going to change considerably when this thing comes through," said John Burdick, chairman of the Watsonville Cable Television Committee. "There's going to be a lot more information coming through."

Burdick, who runs a state-of-the-

art Video Academy at Watsonville High, is particularly excited about the two new public access channels that will be available in each city, possibly even operated from the academy. The channels can offer classes from local colleges, locally produced programming and coverage of local events, including city council meetings.

"Once we get it done and begin to have some typical Watsonville local access, it could be a lot of fun out here," Burdick said. "We have a lot of good people here who have a story to tell."

The cities have negotiated new agreements that extend the current company franchise to 15 years — the only way to gain enough leverage to get an improved contract, according to Burdick. The only other alternative, since Sonic owns the entire cable system,

would be to buy the company out — a financial impossibility for the cities.

The \$7 million upgrade includes a conversion to a fiber-optics system set up in "nodes," or groups of 500 households, so that if there is a problem with one group, it won't affect the others. Fiber optics is a system that transmits light through transparent fibers, enabling faster transmission and far greater capacity than conventional systems. The system offers the capability for eventual Internet access, as well — an option that local educators are already planning for.

Sonic also serves a small unincorporated area of Santa Cruz County, so the county is negotiating with the company as well. The agreement is contingent on a resolution by all three parties.