

Cable-TV lawsuit is finally settled

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A federal judge has signed an order settling the long-standing lawsuit between the city and county of Santa Cruz and Group W Cable Inc.

The order, signed last Tuesday by U.S. District Judge William Schwarzer, overrules all previous judgments in the case and approves a consent decree submitted by all parties which governs the quality of a new cable system to be constructed in the city and county.

Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors Chairman Gary Patton announced the signing Friday. Patton said Schwarzer's order is the final step in the long, drawn-out process of improving cable television in most the county.

A separate firm, Sonic Cable, owns franchises in Capitola, Watsonville and some of the unincorporated area around Watsonville, and is not affected by the order.

The consent decree gives cable subscribers rate protection, Patton said, and is on terms "very favorable" to the city and county.

"It is extremely good news," he said.

The consent decree also governs the construction schedule for the new system and the price of basic cable service over the next 20 months. The court will continue to oversee and enforce the agreement between all parties.

Patton said that with the order signed, United Cable Television Corp. of Denver will officially own the franchise for cable television for customers once served by Group W. United Cable is owned by United Artists Corp.

Patton said the next step is the closing of a series of escrows over the next 30 days. As a result of the settlement, subscribers will receive a new, state-of-the-art cable system under a construction schedule that requires completion in the unincorporated area within 24 months and within 30 months in the city.

Approximately 3,000 residences which do not now have cable service will receive service within that time period. Additionally, community-access television will be available through a locally controlled, private, nonprofit cable-usage corporation.

Patton said the community access provision was not all that was hoped for but he said he was pleased with the other aspects of the settlement.

"All I'm concerned with is good quality and rate protection," he said.

Group W filed suit against the city and county in 1984 when it was denied a renewal of the cable franchise. The City Council and Board of Supervisors took bids on the franchise and awarded it to a group of local business people. Since then the case became increasingly complicated with mergers and acquisitions of Group W and succeeding cable companies.