

County asks bids for cable TV

A call for bids to provide cable television service to most of Santa Cruz County was authorized today by the Board of Supervisors.

With that action, the county officially ended its year-long effort to negotiate a new franchise agreement with the current cable TV provider, Group W Cable. Those negotiations, which were aimed at obtaining a "state-of-the-art" cable system to replace the existing obsolete system in exchange for granting an exclusive 15-year franchise to Group W, broke down over the issue of rate regulation.

County negotiators claimed that Group W refused to accede to their insistence that "subscriber protection" be built into any agreement. Such protection from arbitrary rate raises is needed now, county negotiators said, because under new state laws, the county no longer has the legal right to directly regulate the rates.

The board approved the bid specifications (called a "request for proposal" or RFP) over the ardent objections of one of its members, Watsonville Supervisor E. Wayne Moore Jr. Moore saw in one section of the RFP — one which puts forth the possibility of the county (and the city of Santa Cruz, which is a co-negotiator with the county) becoming "limited partners" of the cable franchise as a way of keeping a lid on rates — the specter of government ownership of the means of communication.

Moore said he could never go along with that, nor for the part of the RFP which calls for "legally binding" proposals from the bidders. Moore said that would drastically restrict the number of companies that might submit proposals.

However, he failed to win the support of even fellow conservative Dan Forbus on that one. Forbus said he didn't see the "partnership" proposal as true government ownership, and he pointed out that the RFP solicits other methods of putting rate control into the agreement.