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City girds for showdown with cable-TV company

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Stay tuned, Watsonville cable TV viewers. Coming up: the showdown between the city of Watsonville and Sonic Cable Television.

The long-running melodramatic series, featuring a cast of thousands, may be heading for its final episode if the city's Cable Television Committee has any say in it.

Committee members are drafting a letter to Sonic Cable, outlining a long list of complaints that

they want to see corrected or else they will recommend to the City Council that Sonic be declared in default of its contract. That letter is due to be ready by next week.

The showdown will not take place on Main Street at high noon, but most likely in a courtroom, where a judge may have to decide if Sonic has defaulted in its 20-year contract, which started in 1983.

John Adams, Sonic's general manager, expressed surprise that the city is considering taking such

action. He said as far as he knows, most Sonic customers in Watsonville are happy with their cable service.

"There might be some customer dissatisfaction, but I think there is a lot of customer satisfaction," Adams said this morning from the company's headquarters in Sacramento.

Adams said any action by the city calling for default of the contract was "extremely premature" and predicted a hard fight ahead

for the city to prove that Sonic failed to provide quality service to its customers.

"I think it would be an impossible task to prove Sonic in default of its contract," Adams said.

The committee's letter will address problems that it says have been around almost as long as reruns of "Gilligan's Island." It will address programming, customer service, quality of service, fees, lack of proper notification of service changes to the city, and de-

nial of the city's request of a local community channel.

"Overall, the variety of programming is weak," reads a draft of the letter, which asks that Sonic's service meet higher standards set by TCI Cablevision, which serves much of the rest of Santa Cruz County.

One committee member described Sonic as a "Model T" and TCI as a "Cadillac."

Sonic currently airs two shopping channels and two country

music channels, while programming "dead air" on channel 2 during prime time. It charges customers for all five channels, though, the letter notes.

"At one time we felt that the customer service policy had improved; at this time we realize that the customers are still treated unfairly," the draft letter says.

The letter also complains that Sonic has closed its offices on Saturday and the city has received a

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multitude of complaints about Sonic's telephone voice mail, which is confusing and seems to be designed to frustrate callers into hanging up.

The committee, which was formed about 2½ years ago, has been collecting data on Sonic, most of which has been in the form of complaints.

Overall, Sonic has been consistently unresponsive to the city's concerns, committee members said. Two-and-a-half years of a lack of cooperation on the part of Sonic is enough and it is time to "fish or cut bait," said Bob Hanna, committee chairman.

Hanna said he wants "all the issues laid out on the table," and asked, "What are we going to do about it?"

Committee members, however, are not optimistic Sonic will do

anything to change current conditions.

"Sonic has been ..." Hanna said, and paused a few moments. "Well, we haven't gotten much response from them."

Gary Smith, assistant city manager, said the city is prepared for such a confrontation with Sonic.

"I don't think we can get out of this franchise without a major fight," Smith said. The City Council realizes that problems with Sonic are political hot potatoes as more and more of the public becomes disgruntled with the cable service.

"I think it's becoming more and more a political issue," Smith said, but he added, "We're not looking for a fight."

If the city cancels its contract with Sonic, the city could work with TCI to bring that company's service to Watsonville as one possible option, Smith said.

Sonic's contracts with outlying areas would not be affected if Watsonville gives Sonic the boot,