

Group W Cable spends 4 hours defending itself

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A parade of legal, technical and managerial spokesmen for Group W Cable Inc. spent more than four hours last Tuesday telling Santa Cruz City Council members and county supervisors why they should renew their contracts with the company.

The presentation was a continuation of marathon hearings the council and board held in October, November and January on awarding the franchises for cable television service which are due to expire July 1.

The speakers for Group W last week presented stacks of paper and hours of arguments to prove the company held a legal right under the 1984 Cable Act to continue serving the unincorporated parts of the county. The company has also claimed it holds a contractual right to renew its contract with the city.

Despite these claims, the city and county are taking steps to award the franchises through a competitive-bidding process. They have received three proposals, in addition to the proposal submitted by Group W.

Group W has also filed suit in federal court in an effort to prove it has the legal right to continue operating in the county.

Under terms of the 1984 Cable Act, a cable company is entitled to renew a franchise if it has performed to certain standards, such as complying with its contract and reasonably meeting community needs.

To prove it has met these criteria for renewal, the speakers read an hours' worth of letters from satisfied customers, recited the company's procedure for responding to customer complaints, reaffirmed its commitment to extending cable service to more remote areas, and rebutted the lengthy testimony against Group W given by dis-

gruntled customers and a former employee of the cable company at previous hearings.

Stewart Butler, manager of Group W operations in Santa Cruz County, said testimony given by many of the people who criticized Group W at the last hearing in January was suspect because many of them had a financial or personal interest in other groups vying for the city and county franchises.

Butler said one speaker had pirated the service for many years before becoming a legal customer. Several of the speakers complaining to the board had no record of reporting the poor service to the company, Butler said.

Butler also defended the soundness of the cable construction against charges by former employee Robert Winstead, now of Redding, who in January described many problems with the cables and called Group W's system in Santa Cruz "the joke of the industry."

When the hour neared 5 p.m., the City Council and county board agreed to let Group W continue speaking for one more hour. They also voted to entertain Group W once more, from 1:30 p.m. to 3 p.m. on Tuesday, April 1.

Peter Smoot, a Los Angeles attorney, said the company needed more time than that to present all the information the council and board would need to make a reasonable, objective decision on the important issue.

Board Chairman Gary Patton responded, "You have chosen to spend an hour reading letters from customers when you could have submitted them as written testimony."

Patton said, referring to the numerous opportunities Group W has been given to present its case, "No greater courtesy or extension of privilege has ever been extended to any person, corporation or interest. I feel you've had ample time to make your case."