

Cable-TV rates to shoot up in much of county

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Monthly cable-TV rates for much of Santa Cruz County will rise from \$13.50 to \$18.14 in December, TCI Cablevision and Santa Cruz County officials have agreed.

Even with the increase, TCI's rate is a "bargain" when compared to rates in neighboring areas, TCI manager Stewart Butler said. TCI (formerly United Artists Cable) provides cable service

to the city of Santa Cruz and much of the unincorporated area of the county.

"We are providing 51 channels of basic service for \$18.14, or 36 cents per channel," Butler said. "Neighboring Sonic Cable (serving Capitola and Watsonville) provides only 28 channels for \$19.50 a month, or 70 cents a channel."

The rate increase, filed in federal court last week, is part of the settlement of a long litigation over rates between the county, the city

of Santa Cruz and TCI.

It's the first increase since a major upgrading of the cable system began three years ago. Negotiations had been ongoing for 10 months; a deal on public-access programming has yet to be worked out.

The \$13.50 rate had been considered a "deep discount" and not a permanent rate, said County Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello in a memo to county supervisors.

The city and the county had gone to court in 1984 over fears that cable companies could charge high rates in a "captive" county such as Santa Cruz, where few stations are available without cable.

The agreement with TCI, which lasts until 2009, calls for annual 5-percent increases in the basic rate. It will rise to \$19.02 one year from now, to \$19.94 in 1994 and \$20.90 the following year.

Included in the new basic rate is

a 10-percent discount for senior citizens. TCI will eliminate the monthly \$2.95 charge for subscribers who don't have their own remote controls.

The county administrative office compared TCI's rates to those of neighboring cable companies:

● Sonic has 28 channels, charges \$19.50 a month, plus \$2.95 a month for a remote.

● Falcon of Gilroy, which serves North Monterey County, has 28 channels and charges \$30.15 a month, plus \$5.25 for a remote.

● Monterey Peninsula TV has 31 channels, charges \$25.45 a month, plus \$4 for a remote.

● South Bay Cablevision of San Jose has 46 channels, charges \$21.97 a month, plus \$4 for a remote.

Ray Belgard, county supervisor for the Watsonville area, said informal talks have been held with Sonic officials over improving that system.

"From what I've read, the people who have TCI get a much better deal," Belgard said.