

# Cable television ordinance tabled

By STEVE SHENDER

On motion of Mayor Bill Johnston, the City Council voted Tuesday night to strike a suddenly controversial cable TV ordinance from its agenda and postpone further consideration until after a public hearing in June.

The action, which came at the start of the council session, foreclosed discussion of the matter by the council Tuesday evening and guaranteed that the ordinance, which would grant a 30-year, non-exclusive franchise to Sonic Cable TV, would not be discussed formally by council members prior to the May 10 municipal election.

In front of about 40 people who had mostly come to hear a discussion of the cable issue, Johnston opened the meeting with the announcement that, "due to the publicity we have been receiving," he was moving to pull the Sonic franchise ordinance from the agenda. Johnston moved to air the entire matter at a public hearing on June 7 at 7:30 p.m. in City Council chambers. His motion was approved unanimously, without discussion, by the council.

Johnston said after the meeting that the city had no plans to elicit public opinion about current cable service or possible improvements to the system between now and the hearing in June. Final council action on the ordinance, which received its "first reading" April 12, could come at the first regular

council meeting after the June 7 hearing, on June 14.

Councilman and mayoral candidate Rex Clark suggested Tuesday night that perhaps the city might send a questionnaire on cable service to subscribers along with their water bills. But City Manager John Radin said there would be only one billing between now and June and that he wasn't sure if that billing would go to water users inside or outside the city limits. (City water bills are sent out bi-monthly; billings alternate between city residents and the city's water customers in the surrounding unincorporated area.)

No one else on the council suggested that the city take any steps prior to the June hearing to seek public comment on cable service.

Clark, a member of the council committee which negotiated the proposed franchise ordinance with Sonic General Manager Les Johnson, said last week that the committee had not previously sought comment from the public because "the thought never occurred to anyone."

Councilwoman Ann Soldo, also a member of the cable committee and a rival mayoral candidate, was silent on the cable TV issue Tuesday night, but the committee's third council member, Frank Osmer, took advantage of time set aside on the agenda for "communications from council" to blast the Register-Pajaronian for its coverage of the matter.

Osmer attacked the paper both for running the cable TV story and for not running it sooner.

"Since Saturday," he said, "they (the Register-Pajaronian) have devoted more space on the CATV matter than they did on the attack on Pearl Harbor starting World War II."

"We got three front page stories, an editorial and two columns written about this matter since Saturday," he said.

Osmer noted that the paper had been virtually silent on the cable issue both before and immediately after the ordinance received its first reading April 12.

"Three days before, on the Friday before the Tuesday of the City Council meeting, the Register-Pajaronian had notice that this cable TV matter was coming up," Osmer said. "They made no public notice of it."

Osmer, who accused this reporter of being a "mouthpiece" for Santa Cruz County Supervisor Gary Patton, said, "It was not until Mr. Patton attacked the council's actions, after a phone call from the Register-Pajaronian inquiring his opinion, that the article came out the following Saturday — almost two weeks after the vote at the City Council meeting."

(Patton, a perennial and vigorous critic of the council and the city staff, was sharply critical of the Watsonville Sonic franchise and called the company's service here "inadequate.")



Frank Osmer had a few words to say about the cable ordinance.

Photo by Kurt Ellison