

Dispatches

Cable Conflict Coming to Head

Bob Johnson

The confrontation between the Westinghouse Corporation and the Santa Cruz community over cable TV service appears headed for a turning point next week.

Earlier this month Westinghouse made its offer for the franchise on local cable TV service for the next two decades. If the cable industry is successful in its lobbying efforts to eliminate local control, the agreement could be the last time Santa Cruzans negotiate with their cable provider.

Since the Westinghouse package was made public, local officials and consultants on the cable issue have blasted it as offering too few channels for too much money with not nearly enough local access. On Tuesday both the County Board of Supervisors and the Santa Cruz City

Council will hold hearings to discuss the proposal and objections to it. In the next few months, the locals appear headed toward either a better deal from Westinghouse or serious consideration of going with a publicly owned system.

The Westinghouse offer would provide a basic service of 27 channels for \$9.35 a month. A more extensive package of 60 cable channels would cost users \$12.95 a month.

As part of the deal, the company has proposed a total of three community access channels to receive \$250,000 in support annually from the system's rather extensive profits.

A cable consultant working for the city and County examined that proposal and came to the conclusion that Westinghouse figures to walk away with a chunk of cash if it is approved.

Santa Cruzans are being asked to pay between 50% and 200% more per channel than residents of numerous Southern California communities that have negotiated recent contracts with Westinghouse, the consultant reported.

Stuart Butler, General Manager for Westinghouse' local TV operation, said, "A lot of the basis for the criticism is unfair." Butler pointed out the Southern California communities used by the consultant have far higher population densities than Santa Cruz. But when asked by the *Express* if any California town had received a higher price per channel than that being offered Santa Cruz, Butler said "I don't know."

City councilmember Mike Rotkin is frank in his appraisal of the company's offer. "It's the pits," Rotkin told the *Express*. For months Rotkin has been working with Supervisor Gary Patton and a number of administrative types on a committee to come up with a coordinated plan for city and County negotiations with the corporation.

The deal being offered to the locals could bring Westinghouse profits as high as

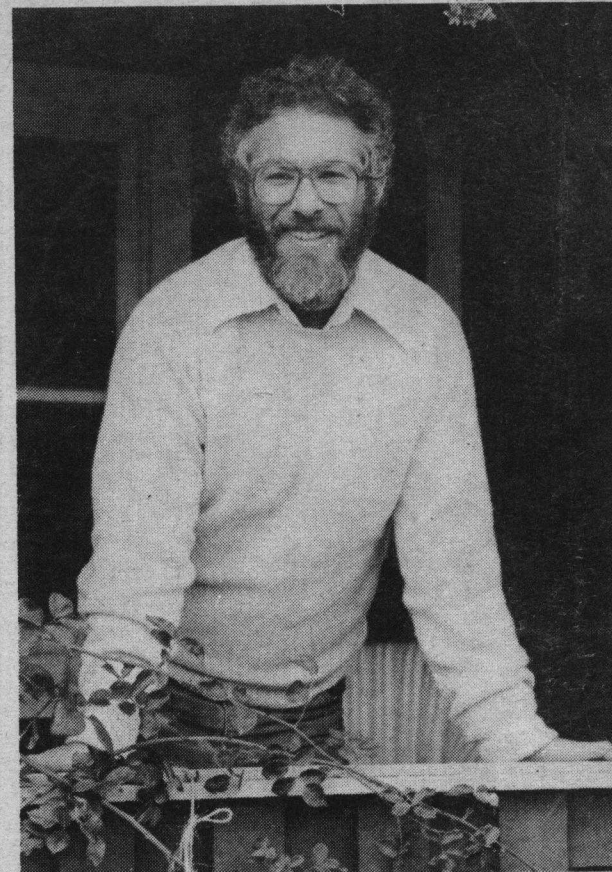
50-60% of its investments, Rotkin has estimated. In addition the community access provision is a fraction of what other communities are receiving and the question of local control over the operation is virtually ignored in the proposal.

Butler is reluctant to discuss possible concessions by the company during negotiations. "That's a good question," he responded when asked how much room for movement there is in the Westinghouse proposal, but "I'd rather not comment on that."

If Westinghouse holds firm to its offer, the idea of a municipal system, which has been lurking in the background for months, could become a strong possibility.

Earlier this month Richard Boyle — a recent arrival in Santa Cruz known for his award-winning film on repression in El Salvador — announced a campaign to put municipal cable ownership on the ballot. Since that announcement, Boyle has filed a notice with the Santa Cruz City Clerk stating the intention to circulate petitions to put the question on the ballot.

Months ago Rotkin was



SC Councilmember Mike Rotkin has raised some questions over just who should run the city's cable TV system.

enthused about the idea of a publicly owned system as the best way to insure quality service and keep the money in the community. Since then, however, legal problems with the idea have made him more cautious. "There are impli-

cations in the last franchise that they can renew unless there is cause not to," Rotkin said. Although he believes the city would ultimately win a court battle over the issue, Rotkin believes it would be terribly expensive. □