

# Local cable rates unaffected by recent federal legislation

By STEVE PEREZ

Sentinel staff writer

SCOTTS VALLEY — With the exception of some possible channel shuffling on the cable television dial, a landmark national cable reform act is having a minimal impact on the county's largest system.

The 1992 Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act was passed by Congress after years of legislative wrangling and complaints from consumers about rates and service.

Established was a formula that linked cable rate increases to the growth of the nation's gross national product. The new law affecting rates takes effect Sept. 1.

But rates for TCI Cablevision of Santa Cruz County customers are already locked in until the year 2009, TCI general manager Stewart Butler said.

"Compared to most other cable systems, the impacts here are negligible," he said.

An agreement struck with the city and county of Santa Cruz last year before the law was passed established a local formula for rate increases, Butler said.

TCI's cable system serves 49,000 customers here.

The local agreement, hammered out as part of a settlement to years of litigation, ties local basic rates to those of neighboring counties.

According to Butler, the rate rollbacks called for in the act are still \$1.69 less than the current basic rate TCI charges locally.

TCI's basic rate is \$18.14 for 51 channels.

Technically, Scotts Valley's 3,400-plus customers are not cov-

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ered by the litigation settlement and could have had their rates raised to the Federal Communications Commission benchmark, they too, will remain the same for the time being.

Mailers to TCI's customers outlining the effect of the new law are being sent out this week. Local government officials also have been briefed on the new law, Butler said.

Sonic Cable, which serves some 14,600 customers in the Watsonville and Capitola areas, offers 14 basic channels for \$18 a month.

Sonic corporate officials in Sacramento did not return a telephone call seeking comment on the new regulations.

The most immediate impact of the action on TCI customers will be the channel positions of some of the local broadcast stations, Butler said.

The cable act gave local broadcasters two options: requiring the local cable system to carry their signal — known in trade jargon as "must carry," or granting the system permission to carry their sig-

nal and negotiate the terms, called "retransmission consent."

Of the local stations on TCI's system, four — KMST, KPIX, KGO and KCBA — have not worked out an agreement with an Oct. 6 deadline looming, Butler said, meaning the cable channels they currently occupy could change.

As of Oct. 6, KSBW, the NBC affiliate in Salinas, will be available to TCI customers on cable channel 6, shifting from its current position of channel 8.

The cable act also calls for minimum standards of customer service — setting time guidelines for dealing with service and installation and refund requests and answering telephone inquiries.

According to Butler, TCI is already exceeding the minimum standards.

For example, the act requires that under normal operating conditions, it should take a customer no longer than 30 seconds to reach a live operator 90 percent of the time.

According to Butler, TCI keeps track of response time with a computer that provides hourly printouts. In July, the company handled 14,100 calls during business hours. In 96.8 percent of the cases, customers were able to reach live operators within the 30-second limit, Butler said.