



Cable viewers will pay more

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By ALISHA WYMAN

Comcast customers in Tuolumne County and Sonora could see higher bills as the company raises rates for some of its services come January.

The rate increases will mostly affect higher-end cable packages like Digital Silver, Gold and Platinum packages, which will rise in cost between \$1 and \$3.

"Overall, it's a \$2 increase, which is less than a hot dog at the movies," said Susan Gonzales, a Comcast spokeswoman.

Standard cable □ two tiers above Limited Basic service □ and installation fees will also be more expensive.

Comcast serves Sonora and most areas in Tuolumne County north of the Tuolumne River.

The increases reflect the addition of channels and the cost of customer service employees the company has brought to Stockton and Sacramento. Previously, when Sonora customers called Comcast, they spoke with contracted employees out of state.

The company made technological upgrades to the cable system as well, Gonzales said.

Basic cable, Digital Classic, Digital Plus, and a few channels such as HBO and Cinemax will remain the same price.

Comcast's franchise agreement with the city and county limits how much it can raise Limited Basic cable rates. The company can, however, raise its other rates as it sees fit, City Administrator Greg Applegate said.

Also in January, the company begins franchising renegotiations with the city and the county. Local governments get a cut of basic cable revenues in exchange for a guarantee of exclusive cable service in the area.

The current agreement, which stipulates that the county and city get 3 percent of the profits □ hasn't been renegotiated in 20 years.

The negotiations are an opportunity for the city to get more services, such as popular channels, broadband Internet or more public access channels, Applegate said.

Gonzales couldn't say whether prices would be raised again as part of the negotiations.

The length of time it will take to negotiate a contract is unpredictable as well, Applegate said.

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Close Window