



City, county renegotiate cable services

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By ALISHA WYMAN

Sonora and Tuolumne County officials are renegotiating contracts with Comcast, their local cable provider.

Workshops slated to run Oct. 25-27 are part of the process. At the workshops, organizations and residents can say what they want from Comcast and learn more about the cable system.

"It really does give the public a chance to get together and provide their input," said Bill Green, a director of Cable Channel 8, the county's public access channel.

Comcast serves the city and most Tuolumne County areas north of the Tuolumne River. Cable rates are not part of the present negotiations and are handled in separate applications.

Negotiations could bring certain popular channels, broadband Internet or other new services to customers. They also could allow schools, government agencies and businesses to use a cable communication system.

If residents say it's needed, Cable Channel 8 could become three channels. PEG or separate public, education and government access channels are common in some communities. City council and board of supervisors meetings, for example, would be telecast exclusively on the government channel under such an arrangement.

But to get more, Tuolumne County and Sonora customers may have to trade some services they now receive because the system is at capacity, said E.J. Jones, another Cable 8 director.

"It's kind of a hardball kind of thing, and the cable company wins a lot, and the city wins a little," she said.

The city and county have hired the Buske Group, a Sacramento consulting firm, to handle negotiations. Buske's Rika Welsh will conduct the public workshops.

Local governments get a cut of profits in return for granting cable companies exclusive franchises, Green said.

Present Tuolumne County and Sonora contracts, signed about 20 years ago, give the governments a 3 percent cut of Comcast's basic cable revenues.

The county's contract expired last spring and the city's will end next year.

"When we negotiated, this was a sweet deal," Jones said. "We were the only one in the state getting 3 percent."

Since then many other counties have have negotiated cuts of 5 percent or more. At the same time, technology has developed exponentially.

Replacement of the old system with fiber optics, which can carry much more information and more services to the county, is one option, Jones said. But this could be long in coming.

"I've heard that for 10 years, that they're going to rebuild; I've heard that it's closer than it's ever been before," she said.

Negotiations could yield a contract for the next 5 to 10 years.

Those interested in attending the meetings should contact Dan Baldree by Oct. 11 at 533-6639.

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