

The gold in Oakland's hills is called cable TV

By TOM LONERGAN

For viewers, sports specials, first-run movies, and other cable television features may be far down the road. But many local officials in Oakland County already are thinking about what public services cable companies can offer and who will deliver them. County government also has a stake in the planning.

MORE THAN HALF of Oakland's 61 cities, villages and townships are studying cable franchising in their communities.

The larger cities — Southfield, Royal Oak, Farmington Hills and Pontiac — are developing cable ordinances. Waterford Township is studying proposals from seven cable companies and could award a franchise as soon as January.

Holly, Northville and Madison Heights have approved cable franchises.

Cable companies must be approved by the local government before publicly owned rights-of-way can be used. The same rights-of-way are used for telephone and electrical service.

The government approval process, of course, is slow. It involves special advisory committees, studies, presentations by cable companies, more studies, public hearings and development of ordinances.

A lot is at stake, particularly money. Many are interested in what cable has to offer, particularly schools, parents and a wide assortment of media companies, including newspaper publishers and broadcasters.

cable information for Oakland County, said it has been estimated a \$100 million investment would be needed to connect the more than 343,000 households in the county to a cable system.

The return, after 15 years, according to Rhodes, is an estimated \$2 billion.

One company "winning" the county is unlikely. The county can't award a county-wide cable television franchise, and Rhodes, manager of criminal justice programs, says it isn't interested in doing so.

BUT THE COUNTY doesn't want to see 60 separate cable franchises spread within its borders, particularly if they fail to include interconnected public access channels for education, library and referral services and government access channels providing quicker access between law enforcement agencies, the courts and a host of other government departments.

Rhodes wants to see the county advising local governments in their negotiations with cable companies, "to raise what the potential is."

In Grand Rapids, for example, officials insisted that the cable company install a line to control traffic lights and help city engineers monitor intersections.

The county is also interested in cable systems to connect the many departments on its sprawling grounds off Telegraph Road in Pontiac and elsewhere.

The Board of Commissioners earlier this month balked at a proposed \$22,000 consultant's contract Rhodes proposed be granted to Malarkey, Taylor & Associates, of Washington, D.C. Rhodes said this week he plans to wait until after the Nov. 4 election to re-pro-

pose the contract which fell two votes short of approval.

THE MALARKEY firm lists as its clients the Carter administration, the Rand Corporation, and the cities of Philadelphia, Indianapolis, Louisville, Rochester, N.Y., and the Washington suburb of Fairfax County, Va.

Martin Malarkey said in a phone interview this week that his firm has assisted most of the top 25 cable companies in the past, but added: "I don't work for any company. I have my own."

If the county board approves Malarkey, the firm would provide information on cable to any community requesting it, and assist the county in planning how to interconnect its various departments in a cable system.

Malarkey agrees with Rhodes that the county "is not interested in becoming involved in franchising cable itself." Rather, it wants to assist local governments.

"They don't want to stick their noses into other people's business," Malarkey said.

He added the "gold rush is still on" for cable franchises, particularly with many of the nation's large cities including Los Angeles, Washington, Baltimore, Boston, and Chicago, as well as the Detroit area, yet to be "wired."

"A lot of financial muscle" is required to win a large city cable franchise, Malarkey said. According to a recent U.S. News and World Report review of cable, 10 large companies control 40 percent of the market. They include Teleprompter, Storer Broadcasting, Viacom, UA-Columbia Cablevision, TeleCommunications Inc., Cox Broadcasting, Time, the Times Mirror

Co., Sammons and Warner-Amex.

GOVERNMENT APPROVAL of cable franchising also brings politics into the picture.

Since local governments have been swayed by local business participation in a cable enterprise, Malarkey said cable companies "seek out more influential" local residents.

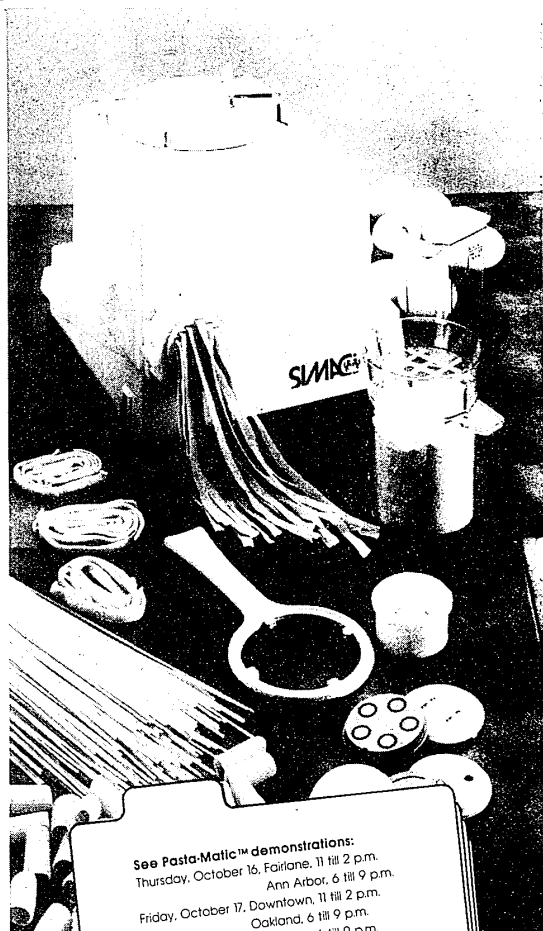
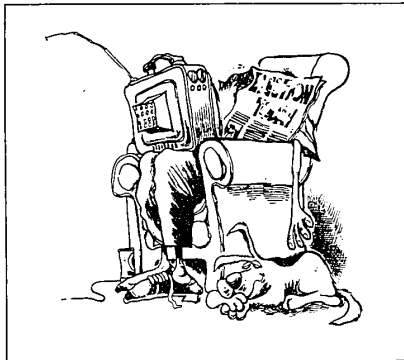
"Now they call it 'rent-a-citizen,'" he said. Some city councils have complained, according to Malarkey, that local businessmen have been promoted as participants in cable efforts without "investing a meaningful amount of money."

THE POLITICS aside, Malarkey calls cable's potential "not unlimited but large in scope."

The cultural and arts promoters apparently aren't threatened by cable siphoning off their live audience.

Malarkey says they "see cable as the thing in the future that will enable them to survive."

"The one thing that turns everyone on is money," he added.



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