

# April 1, expanded basic cable rates to be deregulated

On April 1 (April Fool's Day, fittingly enough), rates for the expanded basic cable service (channels 23-65 and 96-99) will be deregulated.

That means that cable operators can charge whatever they choose for these services; cities can no longer file rate complaints with the FCC based on rate increases for these channels. SWOCC filed such a complaint over the January 1999 Time Warner increase and has not received a response. What effect this rate deregulation will have on that filing remains to be seen.

But remember, only the expanded basic rates are deregulated after March 31. Basic Channels 1-22 and service equipment rates remain subject to local regulation, as long as effective competition does not exist in our community.

So how does this impact your

cable rates? There is some concern that local rate regulation may not be enough to keep cable rates at bay. The vast majority of Time Warner subscribers have both basic and expanded basic service. The problem is that cable operators can simply increase the rates of the newly deregulated channels to offset any basic channel rate reductions.

Currently, Time Warner charges \$10.50 for its basic service, as it did last year. However, most subscribers saw rate increases because the expanded basic service went up, which impacted the entire bill. We sus-

pect the same thing will happen after the April 1 deregulation. Even competition hasn't curbed this trend.

In most instances, in the metro Detroit area, the entry of a second cable service provider has not resulted in a decline in a customer's rates. It simply slowed the frequency and extent to which cable rates continued to increase.

However, we are beginning to see some subscribers cancel their expanded basic service in favor of a satellite dish. But they keep the basic cable service (\$10.50/month) to view local channels (ABC, CBS, NBC, etc.) as well as the public, educational and governmental access channels. Keep in mind that Time Warner charges \$22 to customers who opt to downgrade because they say they must send a technician to the home. One cable customer called SWOCC to

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voice his concern that it's often the customer who can't afford the full service who opts to downgrade. Yet it's this customer who must pay a fee to do so.

Craig DeRoche, Novi city councilman, addressed SWOCC at its last meeting as he had personal

experience in this area. His concern was that callers are not informed of this basic cable option and may unwittingly purchase the complete package when all they want is the very basic service. Then they have an additional charge to downgrade. If you're not sure of the terminology, tell Time Warner that all you want are channels 1-22, or that you choose to pay only \$10.50 a month.

Frank Lathoff, Farmington city manager and SWOCC commissioner, sees the basic cable option as an alternative to senior citizens, as well. "Many hear that cable is over \$30, but that's not the case if you subscribe to the basic service only." In fact, there are only about 500 subscribers who take advantage of this.

Rates have been an ongoing concern, not only in our communities, but nationwide, as well,

with cable rates increasing double the rate of inflation every year. In fact, our local elected representatives addressed that issue in a recent meeting with Sen. Carl Levin in Washington, D.C.

"We asked Sen. Levin to support our local concerns in building caps into the FCC formula for rate increases," said SWOCC Commissioner Bill Hartsock. However, with rate deregulation right around the corner, those limits may not come to fruition.

Caren Collins is the executive director of the Southwestern Oakland Cable Commission. The next SWOCC meeting is 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 27, at Farmington City Hall. The next CAC meeting is 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 13, at SWOCC. The next Community Access Forum is 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 6, at SWOCC. All those interested in public access are invited.



CAREN COLLINS

# FFIA is selling fund-raising tickets throughout March

With the recent snowstorm jumping inches of snow and tons of salt on the roads, it's a good time to think about getting the car washed.

Farmington Families in Action is selling fund-raising car wash

tickets throughout March for Colonial Car Wash on Nine Mile near Farmington. One ticket is good anytime for any size vehicle. For each ticket sold, Colonial owners Holly and Mark Owen will donate \$2.75 from each

\$5.50 ticket for FFIA's efforts to bring substance abuse awareness to the Farmington/Hills community.

For 15 years, FFIA has taught children and parents about

healthy bodies, healthy minds and productive lifestyles.

FFIA offers programs for children in the schools, such as Beginning Addiction Basic Education Studies, to teach third graders about the dangers of

drug and alcohol use and abuse at a preventive stage.

FFIA also provides programming for parents, such as Talking With Your Kids About Alcohol, Generations Responding to Issues and Problems and Middle

School Madness, which focuses on middle school adjustments.

For tickets or more information, call Becky Dworkin at (248) 661-4646 or Marie Stahl at (248) 476-6577.

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