

Viewers look up for options as cable rates rise

By Bill Coutant
Staff Writer

The higher cost of cable TV has some viewers throwing up their hands and looking skyward — in the direction of those satellites.

Area cable companies, including MetroVision, which serves Farmington and Farmington Hills, have raised rates, or will shortly. That, along with legislation that cable companies say could lead to even higher prices, could send more viewers to companies that specialize in satellite dishes, outdoor antennas and other viewing alternatives.

"If any business has doubled in the past year," said Cliff Engerer, owner of Advanced Satellite of Plymouth, formerly of Northville. "Ninety-five percent of all our installation is in cable areas."

Cable TV subscription rates have steadily increased since

1986, when the government deregulated the industry. That, and complaints about service, have gotten TV couch potatoes to pull the plug on cable and install satellite dishes.

No noticeable boom

But in Farmington Hills, there has not been any noticeable boom in installations since the city started issuing permits for satellite dishes 10 years ago.

"We get an occasional one," said Michael Hawley, zoning and code enforcement officer.

The city requires residents to apply for a permit through the building department and submit a site plan. The building department becomes involved if a roof-mounted antenna is requested. Otherwise, the permit goes through the city's zoning officer.

Ground-mounted satellite dishes

cannot exceed 14 feet in height, must be located in the back yard of a residence, and must be screened from view of the adjacent properties by a screening wall or fence, berm, evergreen plantings or some combination thereof.

Donna Neff, the city's building department director, said she said satellite dish installations. And the dish owners are often ignorant of the need for a permit and what the restrictions are.

"Most people do not know that you need a permit," she said. "About 95 percent of the time, it's a neighbor who tells us."

Hawley said beyond the city's requirements, homeowner associations have their own set of rules regarding dishes and antennas.

"We can get them in touch with the association president or contact person," he said. "But that's it. We don't go beyond that."

Rules vary

The rules for installing the dishes vary, Neff said.

"There is no hard and fast rule," she said. "Many have to get approval from a homeowners association."

In Farmington, residents need a building department permit in order to install a dish. There are restrictions on height and distance from the neighboring properties, but no requirements to cover or obscure the dish from other residents, said Earl Billing, department of public works and building department director.

"This ordinance was designed for amateur radio antennas," he said. "The antenna should be far enough so that it won't topple over onto someone else's property."

Because of concerns about the dishes, the city's planning com-

mission has scheduled a public hearing for Feb. 8 on changing the ordinance, Billing said.

Some local rules

Engerer said his company will find out what restrictions apply in a given city.

"Farmington requires an undercover — to make it look like an umbrella," he said. "It hides it a bit. Some places require bushes around it."

Engerer said because of the increased cost of cable, the improved technology of the dishes and the added number of satellites and programming, buying a dish has become less of a novelty.

"It costs about \$2,500 for a good system," he said. "Our financing costs are about \$45 a month. If you buy premium movie channels, you're paying that now."

Engerer said the 21 satellites now in operation offer 24 channels each. Another satellite is planned and new "compression video" dishes, which should be

available next year, will be only two to three feet in diameter. With a big enough dish, viewers can even pick up international programming.

"What you're doing is eliminating the middle man — the cable company," he said.

Even so, dish owners still must pay for the satellite feeds. The average annual bill for satellite feeds is \$200, depending on the number of channels, Engerer said. A lot of customers also purchase antennas for clearer reception, rather than resort to cable, Engerer said.

Dish

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"If you're going to keep it, it's definitely worth buying," Taylor said.

Jerry Pierfederici said reception with a satellite dish is also better. And even pay-for-view selections are enhanced with a satellite dish, Taylor said.

"With regular cable, you can only get one pay-for-view channel," he said. "With a dish, you can order any pay-for-view channel."

But Pierfederici, 57, said he's learned enough to know that technological advances could make his dish less than state-of-the-art.

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