

# Cable TV

## It's time to heed customer needs

Since its debut in living rooms in the 1980s, cable TV has thrust a double-edged sword into family viewing and pocketbooks.

Approximately 40 residents of Novi, Farmington and Farmington Hills attended a public hearing hosted by Southwestern Oakland Cable Commission, the regulatory authority for the participating communities. SWOCC and Time Warner are in the midst of renegotiating a franchise agreement, which expired two years ago. Public hearings are part of the ballgame.

About the only time you get that many interested residents at a public meeting is either when taxes are being increased or a developer is interested in putting something unacceptable near a neighborhood.

But the level of complaints, both at the public hearing and in general, should be a red flag to Time Warner. People are dissatisfied. And it's time Time Warner officials took note.

Users in Novi, Farmington and Farmington Hills indeed pay a hefty price for their cable service and, of course, if premium channels are ordered, the price is considerably higher. We've come a long way since the days when a customer ordered cable just to improve overall television reception.

Like many businesses that have a virtual monopoly in their area of expertise or service, Time Warner — no small corporation — may have forgotten that while profit is important, so is accountability and customer service.

Cable users' hands are tied. They can either cancel their cable service and go without, or they can pay what Time Warner wishes to charge.

It's true that in other communities, such as Plymouth-Canton where cable users have a choice between MediaOne and Ameritech, prices are competitive, and package deals are offered. How long that will last is anybody's

guess. But competition definitely has had an impact, including improving customer service. Ameritech apparently has no interest in competing with Time Warner in this area.

That leaves cable users little choice — except to continue to complain or to cancel their service. Bill Hartsock, Farmington city council member and SWOCC chairman, told users that they should contact the U.S. Congress, which oversees the Federal Communications Commission. One or two complaints in this regard is not enough. If cable users are indeed miffed by the prices they are paying, only a loud and organized effort will do.

There is no doubt that cable TV offers some wonderful programming, such as the History Channel and A&E, as well as a host of sports viewing. But subscribers also pay for duplication and plenty of channels that just offer more of the same.

Unlike in many communities the public access channels used here by the school districts, local government, community organizations and individuals are for the most part well-done and popular. SWOCC, the local governments and schools have made good use of the local channels and have made them useful to the viewing public.

But it appears that Time Warner is balking about upgrading the equipment, as well as providing separate channels for each of the school districts. Whether Time Warner likes it or not, a new franchise agreement must give something back to the community.

Again, Time Warner needs to return to some old-fashioned business ideals: Make the customer happy and profits will come in. To far too many cable users, Time Warner is not a favorable household word. The fact that some 40 residents showed up to complain on a snowy night is a sign that something is amiss.

## There has to be a better way

If your back's not hurting too much from shoveling ... and you're not too busy hunting up a roofer to fix that leak, perhaps you can stand just a few more words on the big blizzard of '99.

The warmer weather and sunshine last weekend helped to melt the 20-plus inches of snow Mother Nature dumped on the area. A few timely raindrops Sunday night also helped.

But snowstorms are like bills, they just keep coming and coming.

Perhaps we've seen the worst of it for this winter. Let's hope so. But there's always next winter and the winter after that, and the winter after that.

Since winter's always going to be around, isn't it time the people who serve in the city and township halls and the county building at 600 Randolph in Detroit start thinking creatively about how to handle a big storm? Perhaps they could come up with some ways to help us truly cope with winter.

Granted, 2-4 inches is hardly the same as 12-20 when it comes to plowing streets, freeways and sidewalks near schools. But it doesn't hurt to be prepared. There are ways to handle winter — it's called planning, preparation, cooperation and yes, some patience.

Perhaps, the sting of the recent winter storm has been how uneven snow removal appeared to be across western Wayne and southern Oakland counties.

Farmington Hills officials were quick to chide the snowplowing job by the Oakland County Road Commission on major roads such as Orchard Lake, Grand River and 12 Mile.

And it wasn't lost on Farmington Hills officials that West Bloomfield's Orchard Lake was in better shape than south of 14 Mile.

A road commission spokesman said that Farmington Hills is under jurisdiction of the Southfield office, which is faced with miles of freeways that must have a top priority for plowing. That's true. But with today's meteorological information, it was no secret the area would be pelted with heavy snows. Perhaps improved planning would help the road commission.

After all, road such as Orchard Lake and Grand River serve as entrances and exits to the Farmington area.

Canton Township roads were in terrible shape more than 24 hours after the Jan. 2 storm hit.

County officials say they underestimated

the amount of work needed to be done to clear the freeways and that was the primary reason plows were late getting to main roads in Canton and other parts of western Wayne.

Then there is the failure of Detroit to meet the snow challenge and that affected the whole metro area in several ways. First, the auto show is the biggest annual event in downtown Detroit and the condition of the roads kept visitors away. Attendance was down 12 percent, according to show organizers.

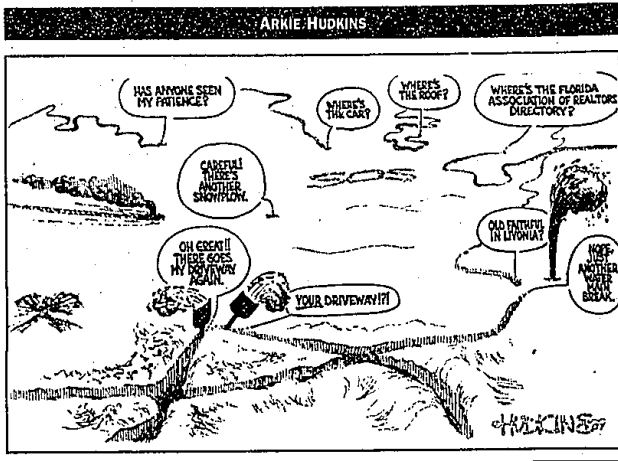
In addition, the national attention that the auto show attracts only increased the attention to Detroit's snow mess. Second, many suburban residents work in Detroit and experienced all kinds of problems getting to and from work. Third, the city's cultural institutions and entertainment venues are used by many suburbanites and even these were affected in the early days. It took the city two days to begin plowing Woodward. Fourth, Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer asked for help from the surrounding area, but he was slow to understand the importance of the problem. He was correct to question spending for a fleet of snowplows to handle a record snow that happens only once in 20 years. But even during normal winters with 4-6-inch snows, Detroit has a problem providing what most municipalities regard as a normal city service. Is regional help needed, should the city, county and state have a more detailed plan in place for these kind of situations?

Redford Township Supervisor Kevin Kelley said overall Wayne County did as good a job that could be expected in dealing with the heavy snow fall. The snow came so fast that trucks had to plow the main roads three to five times to keep them open. Many Redford neighborhoods hire private contractors to clean streets. Kelley says the county eventually cleared township streets.

In Livonia, county-plowed streets got mixed reviews. One example of poor plowing worth noting was the narrowed lanes that still existed (as of Sunday night, even with the thaw) along Six Mile, Newburgh and Haggerty, where two lanes of traffic became 1.5 because the plows didn't push stuff to the curb originally.

Winter and other problems can be solved if we want them solved.

Remember that while you're nursing your aching back.



## LETTERS

### Whopping increase

There is one more thing surer than death and taxes — the annual Time Warner Cable Company rate increase, timed to coincide with the December holidays as a sort of "gift" that nobody wants.

While this year's increase of nearly 5 percent is not as high as in recent years, it has pushed the Time Warner bills some 70 percent higher since 1990, the bit on cable users is much higher when you consider the 50 percent increases in services — un-wired installations from \$25.41 to \$37.76 (49 percent), service charges for reconnecting installations from \$16.61 to \$27.76 (49 percent) and non-standard installations from \$29.54 to \$43.91 (49 percent).

On top of these whopping increases are substantial increases to subscribers of single pay channels. Time Warner has come up with a good rate for those who want multiple pay channels, the Cat Pack. But for those people, including many senior citizens whose income will go up only a few dollars a month in January, will be forced to pay out most of that in cable bills, even if they just take the basic service, which did not go up, but need a repair or are subscribing to one pay channel.

As a member of our city's cable commission I am frustrated that the Congress and the Federal Communications Commission has taken most of the authority to set rates away from the municipalities. If you are as burned up as I am, please let your member of Congress know about it.

Aldo Vagnozzi, mayor  
City of Farmington Hills

### Curriculum concerns

I am writing in response to the recent editorial on the new Farmington Public Schools elementary sexual harassment curriculum. I couldn't agree more, it is the parents' responsibility to teach our children right from wrong. Unfortunately, many parents in today's society are not doing their jobs well when it comes to teaching morals and ethics to their children.

I am one of the parents who went to the school board requesting that parents be notified before the curriculum is taught. The district has an obligation to inform the parents who are taking their parental responsibilities seriously.

Since the school district feels the need to teach sexual harassment in the elementary schools, the district needs to make every effort to inform the parents. This can be accom-

plished by having a parent's right to preview the curriculum before it is taught in the classroom. This will enable the parents to have meaningful discussions with their child at home about these lessons, prior to or after the lessons have been taught.

I fear that by the school district teaching these lessons, they are placing themselves in a position of teaching morals and values to our children, thus compromising the rights of responsible parents. For that reason, I think parents should have the option to waive their child from this curriculum.

It is unfortunate that the school district sees the need to take valuable classroom time away from the curriculum that will pave the way for our kids' futures. A higher obligation should be placed upon the schools to prepare our children for the next step in the educational process. Johnny can't read, Johnny can't write, but, Johnny will be able to take you to court.

Patti Kohnert  
Farmington

### Thanks for help

On behalf of the Salvation Army of Farmington Hills, I would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere appreciation to the many individuals, families, organizations and churches who rang bells for the Salvation Army this Christmas season. Many of these volunteers were first-time ringers and we hope they found this experience to be a rewarding one.

Due to the support of our community, we are pleased to announce that we have surpassed our kettle goal. This money will be used to support the community center and the social services program which assist people in need in the Farmington Hills, Livonia, Novi and Redford areas.

May God bless all of you in 1999 and always. We look forward to seeing you again next year!

Lt. Andrew L. Stouder  
corps officer

Opinions are to be shared: We welcome your ideas, as do your neighbors. To assure authenticity, we ask that you sign your letter and provide a contact telephone number.

Letters should be mailed to: Editor, The Farmington Observer, 33411 Grand River, Farmington 48335. Or they can be faxed to (248) 477-9722.

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