

# PALO ALTO DAILY NEWS

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## Access is difficult on AT&T cable

*Palo Alto considers suit against telecom giant*

**By Kristina Peterson / Daily News Staff Writer**

Most Monday nights, the Palo Alto City Council meeting on Channel 26 is just a couple clicks away from any resident with cable television.

But beginning in early- or mid-2008, locals may have to scroll up to channel 99 and weave their way through a series of screens to find public, educational and government programming if AT&T rolls out full cable service in the city.

And after finally reaching the public broadcast, residents will not be able to preserve it with a digital video recorder, list it as a favorite or utilize closed-captioning features - all of which violates state law, said Melissa Cavallo, cable coordinator of the joint powers authority managed by Palo Alto.

"If you ever get (to the program), the features, functions and qualities of the picture are inferior to commercial channels," Cavallo said Friday. "They are giving our channels second-class treatment."

The picture quality on public programming channels under AT&T will be less than one-fourth of its current resolution, according to a city staff report.

Even more problematic, students watching DeAnza College's filmed lectures will not have access to closed captioning for recorded classes.

The proposed system "really prevents students in the disabled community from being able to participate in the educational programming," Cavallo said.

After having raised these issues repeatedly with AT&T and getting no substantive response, the city is contemplating legal action against the telecommunications company, Cavallo said.

"If AT&T fails to comply with (state law), the city will be forced to explore all its options, including legal action if necessary," she said. Right now, the city is waiting for AT&T to respond to a letter sent last month stating its objections.

AT&T spokesman James Peterson said Friday he could not comment on specific issues until the company has responded to the city's complaints, but AT&T does believe it is in compliance with all state laws.

After the state passed the Digital Infrastructure and Video Competition Act last year, AT&T obtained a license in March to start offering cable services to local areas, including Palo Alto. The company already has begun some service in East Palo Alto and Foster City. The law was supposed to encourage competition between cable companies, offer consumers more choices and eventually lower prices, Cavallo said.

As the area's telephone service provider, AT&T has much of the necessary infrastructure already in place, making its expansion to cable economically viable, Cavallo said.

She said offering Palo Altans an alternative to Comcast, their "incumbent cable operator," is a good concept if AT&T complies with the state law's prohibition against separating public programming channels from commercial stations and meets the requirement that all channels offer equal sound and visual quality.

At the Midpeninsula Media Center, executive director Annie Folger said she is concerned that residents will no longer be able to find the local programming filmed by the center simply by surfing channels. And as a nonprofit

organization, the Media Center does not have the advertising budget to redirect locals.

"If they put us on channel 99 and people have to go through a process that takes a minimum of 81 seconds and at least five different screens ... no one will ever stumble upon one of our channels," Folger said.

"It's like putting the PEG (public, educational and government) channels in the ghetto," she said.

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