

Local/States

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Sammons confirms Bristol will get its MTV back today

DAVID WICKERT
Staff Writer

MTV will be back on in Bristol today, months before originally predicted.

Sandy Mutter, marketing director for Sammons Communications, confirmed that the music network will be seen in the city for the first time since the early morning hours of Jan. 1, but referred additional comment to the cable company's headquarters in Dallas. Officials from Sammons' headquarters did not return phone calls Thursday.

Even without all the details, supporters of the network expressed sur-

prise and satisfaction at the news. The weeks they spent protesting Sammons' decision to pull the popular network were justified, they said.

"I feel that our fight has accomplished something," said Mark Swiney, one of several dozen people who regularly picketed Sammons' Bluff City Highway office this winter. "I feel if our voice had not been heard, nothing would have happened."

Kristie Hawk, another protester, agreed. "It just goes to show that a few people with an idea can stand up to anything," she said. "I'm just stunned that it's back this soon."

Angela Spangler, the Virginia

High School student who began the protest back in December, said she had given up hope of seeing MTV herself in Bristol because she will soon leave for college.

Sammons announced in March that it would bring MTV back to Bristol by year's end, citing a lack of channel capacity as the primary reason for the delay. The network was not expected to return for several months.

No information was available Thursday about the network's status in Johnson City and other communities affected.

MTV was terminated here after months of contract negotiations be-

tween the network and Sammons proved fruitless. Sammons sought concessions from the network, hoping to carry MTV as a pay network for its customers who wanted the service. MTV, however, refused to be carried in such a fashion.

When the MTV contract ended Dec. 31, Sammons chose not to renew it, replacing the network with the Jukebox Network, a pay video service. Subscribers in Bristol and Johnson City, along with Bensalem, Pa., and Vineland, N.J., were affected.

Spangler and her friends quickly took exception, saying Sammons did not properly notify its customers of

the change and questioning a survey showing fewer than one-third of Sammons' subscribers watched MTV. They planned protests in front of Sammons' office, which grew from week to week to more than 50 people.

The local protests received a major boost from rock star John Mellencamp, who performed at a free concert in Johnson City in February. After the concert, interest began to wane. But on March 19, Sammons and MTV announced a new agreement, in which MTV essentially surrendered the concessions that the cable company sought.

Judge: FOI not violated in Washington

MARTHA J. MILNER
and DAVID WICKERT
Staff Writers

ABINGDON — A circuit judge has ruled that the Washington County Board of Supervisors did not commit "a willful and knowing violation" of the Freedom of Information Act during a closed session at its Jan. 30 meeting.

In a related matter, the

forbid any further discussion on the topic."

Smith said County Attorney J.C. Walsh has advised the court that appropriate measures have been taken to enlighten all board members with regard to the specifics of the Freedom of Information Act and to assure strict compliance in the future.

County officials declined to comment Thursday on the deci-

No way



Trust fund hearing postponed

JANE MEADE
Wise County Bureau

BIG STONE GAP — A hearing to determine if a preliminary injunction should be invoked to prevent the Bituminous Coal Operators' Association from ousting one of its representatives to the ailing union trust funds has been postponed.

The hearing, set to begin today in U.S. District Court in Big Stone Gap, has been rescheduled for May 20-21 in Abingdon. In the interim, Senior U.S. District Judge Glen

Sammons system up for sale

*Cable official says sale
won't stall service upgrade*

By MARK HYLER
Bristol Herald Courier

The planned sale of Sammons Cable by its parent company, Sammons Enterprises, shouldn't affect the local cable franchise's rebuilding operations that will more than double its channel capability and offer numerous new channels to Bristol customers by the end of the year.

The rebuilding will expand Sammons' capability from 34 to 80 channels, with more than 20 new optional channels for Bristol subscribers.

Steve Pollock, Sammons Communications general manager in Bristol and Johnson City, said local Sammons employees were shocked by Wednesday's announcement that the nation's 14th largest cable operator was up

for sale.

Though no offers have been made public to this point, Pollock speculated that the Dallas-based cable group, which has about 1,000 employees, and 1.1 million customers in 350 cities across 19 states, may become property of an outside telephone company.

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"There's a good chance of that. It's going to have to be either a very large cable company or one of the phone companies — it takes so much capital now that I doubt a smaller cable company could afford to buy," he said. "I think Sprint/United would be barred from buying, because they can't own a cable system in the same area they provide phone service to, but there's nothing that would stop one of the Bell companies from coming in, and they've certainly expressed an interest in the cable industry. That's just speculation, though."

The sale, which is expected to bring between \$1 billion and \$2 billion, will likely take a minimum of six months to a year to complete — probably more if a phone company gets involved, Pollock said. In the meantime, the Bristol Sammons franchise shouldn't see any changes that weren't already in the works for the last couple of years.

"Our rebuilding operation is continuing, and we have plans to add new channels very quickly," Pollock said Friday. As a result of the rebuilding, Sammons will soon expand its channel capability from

34 to 80 channels, with more than 20 new optional channels for its Bristol subscribers.

"These are channels people are requesting from us," Pollock said. "We've finally muddled through all the federal regulations that had our plans on hold for a while."

Among the new offerings, which will cost subscribers a little more, are the Sci-Fi Channel, the Comedy Channel, Court TV, America's Talking, CNBC financial channel, the Travel Channel, the Faith and Values Channel, E! Network, Z Music Channel, Country Music TV, Black Entertainment Television, ESPN 2, the Learning Channel, and the TV Food Network.

Pollock said the upgrades to the system will also make four new premium channels available to customers, and will require the relocation of some current channels.

He said the franchise anticipates having the new channels on line by the end of the year, and some subscribers already have access to a couple of the channels. Pollock added that not all 80 channel slots will be filled immediately.

Work on the \$5 million upgrade, which includes installation of new fiber optic lines to make the additional service possible began in late 1992.

Three of the new channels will be offered a la carte — the Sci-Fi Channel for \$1, the Comedy Channel for \$1, and Court TV for 90 cents — or in a package for \$2.61 per month. All the other new channels, with the exception of the four premium channels, will be part of the franchise's upper-level tier.

Pollock said customers who want to subscribe to the upper-level tier will be paying a little more for the services, but accountants have not finished formulating how much of an increase will be required.

Sammons, which came to Johnson City in 1962 and began wiring Bristol for cable television in 1965, separated its programming into two tiers as a result of the Cable Act of 1992.

The basic tier, or Lifeline, includes two PBS stations; local ABC, CBS and NBC stations; TBS; WGN; QVC; C-Span and C-Span II; and local access and independent stations. The upper-tier package currently includes the Weather Channel, MTV, A&E, Lifetime, ESPN, Discovery, TNT, Nickelodeon, USA, The Family Channel, CNN, Headline News, American Movie Classics and The Nashville Network.

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Sammons sells its Bristol, Johnson City cable TV systems

Staff and Wire Reports

Sammons Communications has agreed to sell more than half its cable television systems, including those in Bristol and Johnson City, to Marcus Cable for \$1 billion, the companies said Friday.

The properties acquired by Marcus serve some 650,000 customers in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, northern and southern California, the Midwest and the South.

Dallas-based Sammons Communications, privately owned, serves 1.1 million customers in 18 states.

The deal is subject to regulatory

approval and other conditions and is expected to close by year-end.

Marcus said the deal will make it the eighth-largest cable company in the country, with approximately 1.2 million customers.

The Dallas-based private company was formed in 1990 by Goldman Sachs & Co. and Jeff Marcus, who was vice president of marketing for Sammons 23 years ago. Marcus Cable now serves some 580,000 customers in Wisconsin, Texas, Alabama, Delaware and Maryland.

"Our decision to accept the Marcus Cable offer was based both on

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A merger

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financial considerations and on our longstanding relationship with and confidence in Jeff Marcus," James Whitson, chairman of Sammons Enterprises, said in a news release.

The new Sammons operations will be combined into the company, which still will be based in Dallas, Marcus said.

Steve Pollock, general manager of Sammons Communications in the Tri-Cities, said the sale should have little if any impact on Sammons' cable customers.

"It should be fairly transparent to the customer," Pollock said Friday night. "We don't anticipate any great changes to take place other than the name change."

Marcus will be new to the Tri-Cities area market, but Pollock

said the company is not a newcomer to the business. "This company is really on the move; they've been very aggressive over the last couple of years," he said.

Pollock said the sale does not include Sammons systems in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, which are expected to be sold separately. Those Northeastern systems account for about a fourth of Sammons' subscribers.

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