Electronic Robin Hood in Bronx Offers Cable TV, Minus Franchise

By JAMES BARRON

In the last year or so, a small cable television company in the South Bronx quietly wired 1,200 homes and apartments for HBO, MTV, Cinemax and all the other programs on its 40-channel system. The only problem, city officials say, is that all of those hookups were illegal: the company, Urban Cable Systems, never had a franchise for them.

It sent out bills every month, like other cable companies, but city officials maintain that it was a cable company like no other. It never bothered with city permits to dig trenches in the streets, snake cables through city-owned lamp posts and run wires up the sides of buildings like the Bronx Criminal Courthouse. City officials say the company just went out and did the digging, snaking and running.

"They were stringing wires like lights at a garden party," said William F. Squadron, New York City's Commissioner of Telecommunications and Energy, whose agency oversees cable companies. "Well, the party's over."

Serving the Shunned

The company, which had a contract to wire city housing projects in the Bronx — and only housing projects — says it was all a big mistake. Even so it agreed yesterday to rip out the wires and pay for satellite dishes on the rooftops of its customers' buildings so they can continue receiving the same programs from Urban Cable.

But 30 of the households will lose cable service altogether until Cablevision, the official franchise holder in the Bronx, comes to their neighborhood — in 1995. So will a firehouse and an elementary school that the city says Urban Cable signed on without charging the usual installation fees.

To some cable customers, Urban Cable was a kind of electronic Robin Hood, eager to serve poor neighborhoods that some of the nation's biggest cable companies had shunned — and for a little less than cable companies that serve other parts of the city charge.

To other cable watchers, Urban Cable was an unusual but not unwelcome player on the city's last cable...
A Robin Hood Offers Cable TV Without Permits

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frontier, the Bronx. For it was Urban Cable that made it possible for people within cheering distance of Yankee Stadium to watch Yankee games carried only on cable channels.

"They seemed so authentic," said Iris Diaz, who said her Urban Cable favorites were Weather Channel, Sportschannel and Arts & Entertainment.

Modesto Carrino, a neighbor of Mrs. Diaz on Courtlandt Avenue, said Urban Cable installers were friendly and professional. "They came with tools and a whole mess of wires," he said.

But there was something unusual about Urban Cable, Mr. Carrino said. "They specified, time after time after time, that if any problems arose, call them, no one else."

This may be why Urban Cable apparently achieved a singular distinction in the often angry annals of cable television in New York City: no one ever complained about Urban Cable to Mr. Squadron's agency. Some Bronx residents, in fact, called to ask how to sign on with Urban Cable.

He said the department found out about Urban Cable's undercover and sometimes underground doings almost by accident. One of the agency's engineers, assigned to monitor Cablevision's progress in wiring other parts of the Bronx, got a tip.

Yesterday, after Urban Cable had agreed to pay a $20,000 fine and take out a $1 million insurance policy to protect the city from claims relating to the illegal work, Mr. Squadron called what Urban Cable did "brazen and dangerous." He said the company had threatened safety by drilling in streets, risking hitting water mains or power lines. He said that because the company ran its wires through apartments, the city could not repair them because that would have knocked out the entire cable system, legal and illegal.

Dish on a Roof

The chief executive of Urban Cable, J. Barry Washington, said the illegal wiring had been ordered by two managers who have since been reassigned pending further disciplinary action. They were supposed to be signing up customers in the Mott Haven Houses, one of 10 housing projects that Urban Cable had arranged — through official, pardon the expression, channels — to serve. Under Urban Cable's contract with the New York City Housing Authority, the company was to install a dish-shaped antenna on the roof of one building at the Mott Haven project. The antenna was to receive signals from satellites — the same programs that other cable systems get in much the same fashion. Urban Cable was to run the wires to them out on wires that it had installed in the housing project.

Suddenly, Urban Cable turned Mott Haven Houses into the envy of the neighborhood. "The demand was so strong in that area that a couple of our managers could just not say no," Mr. Washington said. "They started wiring areas they should not have. It was definitely a big mistake." He said the revenues from the 1,000 additional subscribers was "not even significant in the overall plan." He said there were almost 5,000 apartments in Mott Haven and another nearby project that Urban Cable was authorized to wire, so when his employees reported that 2,000 subscribers had signed on, Mr. Washington believed that he was reaching 50 percent of his target audience — an unusually high level.

"It came in better than we expected," he said, "but it turned out we had more buildings wired than we thought. I don't know how else to put it. We're sorry it was done, and obviously, it's an embarrassment."

Urban Cable charged competitive rates — $17.95 a month for basic service, $7.95 for the Disney Channel and $8.95 for other premium channels like HBO or Cinemax. Cablevision charges between $9.95 and $9.95 a month, depending on what premium services a customer wants, and charges $34.95 for installation. Mr. Washington said his company charged about $30.

"We serve a low-income community that has every right in the world to the same access to cable as everyone else," said Val Coleman, a spokesman for the city's Housing Authority. "We saw this as the way to do it, though it has not been successful in most cases."

Cablevision is to wire the Mott Haven area in 1995, making it one of the last neighborhoods in the Bronx to receive cable.

"Word of all this did not seem to have reached Urban Cable's office yesterday," a reporter asked and asked what neighborhoods the company served.

Urban Cable Systems wired 1,200 homes in the Bronx for cable television, but city officials say the hookups were illegal because the company never had a franchise for the customers or city permits to run the cable. "They seemed so authentic," said Iris Diaz, watching television in her Bronx apartment.

"We got the South Bronx," a man said yesterday. "We haven't covered all the area yet. If we've put in the wire we'll service you. And if we haven't we'll get permission from the landlord and put the wire in."