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With both sides playing hardball in a carriage fee dispute, Dish Network asked Tribune Broadcasting on Thursday to agree to a "baseball-style" arbitration to end a four-day television blackout.

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Tribune Broadcasting's 42 stations went dark for 50 million Dish Network subscribers across the U.S. on Sunday evening after failing to reach a contract renewal. At issue is the price Dish is willing to pay to carry those stations, a fee which is passed on to subscribers.

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"We want to return these local stations to our customers immediately, and binding, baseball-style arbitration offers a path to reach a fair deal and to serve the best interests of our customers," Warren Schlichting, Dish executive vice president of programming, said in a news release. In baseball arbitration, each side submits a firm price, and the arbitrator selects one.

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Dish Network provides satellite TV programming to about 14 million subscribers, including 290,000 in the Chicago area, according to media research firm SNL Kagan.

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Tribune is seeking a multiyear agreement with "significant price increases" from Dish to carry its stations, according to the Colorado-based satellite provider. The 1992 Cable Act gave broadcasters the right to seek retransmission consent fees, an increasingly important revenue source for TV stations.

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Unable to reach an agreement by Sunday's 6 p.m. deadline, Tribune pulled the plug on WGN-Ch. 9 for Chicago Dish viewers, as well as WPIX-TV in New York, among other stations. The blackout also affected access to cable station WGN America for 7 million Dish subscribers.

On Wednesday, Tribune issued a news release saying Dish has been "totally unresponsive" to its negotiation efforts, including its latest proposal delivered after the blackout Sunday evening. Tribune also had offered to extend the existing carriage agreement before the blackout deadline.

"We repeatedly offered Dish an extension through the end of August, more than 60 days, for precisely this reason — they drag their feet in negotiations," Gary Weitman, spokesman for Chicago-based Tribune Media, said in the release.

Tribune also is seeking more clearance for WGN America, the former superstation that has been converted into a full-fledged cable network with original programming — minus Cubs baseball. WGN America reaches 80 million homes across the U.S., up from 75 million four years ago.

In its release, Dish said Tribune is attempting to "force bundle" WGN America with its local TV stations.

Dish has distributed "tens of thousands" of free over-the-air antennas to customers affected by the blackout but said it wants Tribune to restore the channels to subscribers during the arbitration process.

Without resolution, Dish subscribers in Tribune's ABC-affiliated markets will lose access to Game 6 of the NBA Finals on Thursday night, among other programming. -

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