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PUC passes rural phone provision

By Ashley Tressel, The Willits News

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SACRAMENTO >> The California Public Utilities Commission passed a provision to help protect rural Californians 3 votes to 2 votes. The Revised Proposed Decision, written by Commissioner Catherine Sandoval, improves outage reporting requirements that impact rural phone service and access to emergency services.

The decision changes the number of user minutes, minutes in which phones are disconnected in an outage, required for a standing data request from 900,000 to 90,000, which will help rural areas that experience frequent outages get more attention from phone companies. It took a few years to make that basic requirement happen, said Sean McLaughlin, Access Humboldt executive director. Since the change in user minute requirements is an easy fix, he expected a unanimous vote in favor.

“To me, it was shocking that it was a 3-2 vote,” said Mclaughlin.

The decision also gives law enforcement a direct line to the phone company to find out what’s going on in case of an outage. That would prevent catastrophes like the 2014 outage in Mendocino and parts of Lake counties, in which the Mendocino sheriff’s office was unreachable and left unaware.

McLaughlin credits Mendocino County for having the greatest influence on the decision passing.

“Mendocino did the hard, heavy lifting here,” he said.

Trish Steel, Broadband Alliance of Mendocino County chairwoman, and Fifth District Supervisor Dan Hamburg went to San Francisco Nov. 30 to try to convince commissioners to support Sandoval’s proposal. Apparently, their efforts paid off.

“I feel like they listened to our community and public officials as to our needs,” said Steel.

The decision fills what she calls a “critical lack of data,” for the commission to be able to correct outages quickly and notify local officials of emergencies. She said it’s a public safety issue, “literally a life or death situation,” since outages can eliminate people’s access to life-saving resources, like ambulances.

Although she’s happy the decision passed, she also hoped it would be unanimous.

“I am also disappointed that Commissioners Peterman and Randolph voted against this decision, which includes what seems to me to be very common sense measures which are critical for rural counties, such as outage notification to the California Office of Emergency Services (CalOES) Warning Center and to the

CPUC,” she said.

AT&T and Verizon lobbied against the decision, submitting comments to the CPUC.

AT&T made a number of statements rejecting the decision, including that it was “troubled by the substantial expansion of issues captured in the (Proposed Decision) without a corresponding solicitation for needed additional participation from critical stakeholders, such as the public safety community,” according to a document containing Mendocino County’s responses to carrier comments.

The county refuted this by stating that the AT&T was invited to public participation hearings in Ukiah, but did not attend. A number of AT&T customers in Mendocino County gave testimonials of poor service and dropped calls at those hearings, and that evidence was included in the decision.

According to Steel, the lower thresholds enforced by this decision will provide the CPUC with important data that they’ve been missing.

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