

## **CPUC gets an earful on telecommunications failures**

### **Commissioners hope to propose a decision by the fall**

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A judge and a commissioner from the California Public Utilities Commission heard numerous horror stories from residents Friday about failures in the telecommunications system, which included loss of access to emergency services.

About 60 people attended the proceedings on July 15 in the Board of Supervisors' chambers. Commissioner Katherine Sandoval and Administrative Law Judge Katherine Macdonald heard testimony from 36 people.

Sandoval told those assembled that, while the proceeding was opened originally "to look at issues involving rural call completion," which has become a national concern, the Commission "kept hearing stories, over and over again, about people losing access to 911 calls," as well. "California is one of about eight states that has a very specific law that requires telephone and telegraph companies to carry and complete calls," she informed the public.

North Coast Senator Mike McGuire (D-Healdsburg) testified about the "hardships of telecom outages," which include the fact that "there is no provision to let California citizens know" about an outage. "At a bare minimum," he said, the Office of Emergency Services should receive notice from utility providers about a failure of communications systems.

Assemblyman Jim Wood (D-Cloverdale) testified next, about the role of telecommunications in education and economic development. He also addressed health, when he said that if rural residents could use teleconferences for medical appointments, they could "tap into world-class healthcare."

Trish Steel, of the Mendocino Broadband Alliance, emphasized that "legacy services need to be maintained," as many rural residents lack reliable cell phone access. "Historically, landlines have been our emergency lifeline," she stated. "Our system became a model for the world," she said of copper-wire landlines built with public money.

The aspect of public safety was emphasized, as firefighters, law enforcement officials and medical personnel spoke about failed 911 calls. Randy McDonald, the Chairman of the Communications Committee of the Mendocino County Fire Chiefs Association, testified that "we've been encouraging fire chiefs to let citizens in their districts know how to get through to the emergency reporting systems, should your 911 service go down: go to the firehouse. Go to the police station nearest you, if you have no access to landline or cell service."

However, Sheriff Tom Allman said his own dispatchers had not known about one telecommunications failure until it had been underway for six hours. "If the phone lines were down, we would have been notified," he said, to laughter from the crowd. "We're being told the problem is fixed," he continued. But his office "would like to know how they fixed it...with all due respect to AT&T, they're a corporation...we're public safety..."

when an AT&T person tells me they can't tell me something because of corporate secrets or intellectual property, I'd just like them to know, I'm the sheriff of the county, and I can keep a secret." He estimated that one outage had cost his department \$35,000.

Charles Gilchrist, a Lieutenant with the Fort Bragg Police Department, related an incident about his inability to call an ambulance for an injured citizen, as "the golden hour" after the injury slipped away.

Jen Banks, an Emergency Medical Services Coordinator, described how her office deployed ambulances to highly visible locations during one outage, so people could flag one down if they needed it.

Jeff Fox, IT Director at Mendocino Coast District Hospital, spoke about hardships resulting from the inability to check drug interaction databases or access insurance eligibility. "Vandals caused the damage to the equipment," he said of the outage in September; "but the outage itself was caused by AT&T."

Another peculiarity was noted by Lorraine Dechter, General Manager of KZYY and Z. "When that last fiber cut occurred," she testified, "we couldn't reach the sheriff's station...we ended up reaching a real estate office in Benicia," which was "getting all the phone calls for the sheriff's department here. After a while, we ended up with a contact from NOAA up in Eureka, who gave us the phone numbers to give out to our listeners." Later in the day, she called the real estate office again, and asked, "has anybody called you and given you these numbers to actually give to the people you're getting by accident in Mendocino County? And no, they had not."

Sage Statham, who has a business association with AT&T, spoke about "weird responses" from the company when concerns are brought to its attention. Statham is the manager for Mendocino Community Network, which, as a reseller for Sonic Telecom, is an ILEC, or Incumbent Local Exchange Carrier, for AT&T. This means that they lease direct copper lines from the company for Mendocino and Fort Bragg. Statham said a diverse fiber path, where lines have more than one route, is the best solution to the problem of multiple outages caused by one incident. He said AT&T claimed it was not required to provide MCN with access to a secondary fiber route.

After the hearing, which lasted close to four hours, Commissioner Sandoval said the next steps would include "several more of this type of proceeding," with the goal of proposing a decision by the fall.

Telecommunications Advisor Bill Johnson, Jr., said this could result in the Commission issuing an order to utilities, possibly an "opening to what could be a larger set of proceedings."

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