

County Broadband Alliance seeks info about dropped calls amid delay requests for PUC provisions

Telecoms asking to delay PUC provisions

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Thursday, February 2, 2017



Broadband Alliance of Mendocino County Chairwoman Trish Steel is asking residents who have experienced phone outages to fill out a survey that will be used in future discussion about phone service in rural counties.

The survey by the state Public Utilities Commission includes a question about experiences with loss of dial tone on landlines, mobile phones and VoIP phones, which use an IP network like the internet to place calls. Respondents are asked to provide details about outages like when it occurred and for how long. Recent

storms have exacerbated the problem and will likely continue to in the coming weeks, Steel said.

Steel said this is important information for public safety officials to have, especially when it involves 9-1-1 and emergency services.

“When phones are out, our public safety officials often don’t even know,” Steel wrote in an email. “This is not related to reporting your problem to your phone company; this is in separate from that, and is very important.”

The information reported in the survey will be taken into consideration under Phase 2 of the Final Decision by former Commissioner Catherine Sandoval passed in December.

Phase 1, which launched an investigation into the August 2014 outage in Mendocino County and gave law enforcement officers a direct line to telephone companies in case of emergency, resulted in a “significant victory for rural counties,” Steel wrote.

But a few big telecom companies have requested the PUC to delay implementation of most of the Phase 1 provisions, including one that would provide a 24/7 emergency number to city, county and federally recognized tribal Office of Emergency Services officials. The request also includes provisions that would require carriers to submit call completion problems on a monthly basis and evaluate the practice of attaching facilities to trees, according to Steel.

The Utility Reform Network, along with Melissa Kasnitz of the Center for Accessible Technology and Mendocino County 2nd District Supervisor John McCowen, issued a response to the carriers’ request arguing that the carriers do not provide justification for such a delay and that their arguments are “inadequate.” The response references AT&T’s reasoning that it be granted an extension on deadlines to carry out Phase 1 provisions because it will be busy attending meetings that will impact its ability to comply, among other

explanations, as falling under that label.

An AT&T spokesperson sent the following statement in an email: “Our request for an extension is part of our good faith effort to comply with the Commission’s directives, and to best serve our customers. The CPUC’s order called for further collaboration to address unresolved issues, many of which impact customers. AT&T along with others in the industry have requested a time extension to work with CPUC Staff, Cal OES offices, carriers and other stakeholders to ensure this is implemented thoughtfully.”

Steel said now they don’t have any idea when Phase 2 will be completed, let alone if the telecoms will seek to overturn the Final Decision completely.

Rep. Huffman introduces rural broadband bill

Rep. Jared Huffman (D-CA), along with Reps. Mark Pocan (D-WI) and Rick Nolan (D-MN), on Wednesday introduced a bill that would authorize \$20 billion for new broadband infrastructure focused on rural communities, allow the Rural Utility Service to offer broadband grants to increase its overall investment from \$25 million to \$50 million annually and establish a new Office of Rural Broadband Initiatives to better coordinate all federal rural broadband deployment programs, according to a press release from Huffman’s office.

Called the New Deal Rural Broadband Act of 2017, the legislation has lofty aims to “close (the) digital divide in rural America.”

“The longer we allow the digital divide to persist in rural America and Indian country, the more Americans will be left behind,” said Rep. Huffman in the release. “The New Deal Broadband Act is an ambitious blueprint to connect every home, school, and business in America to high-speed, reliable broadband so we can all compete in the world economy. All Americans deserve the benefits of improved economic development, as well as expanded public safety, health, and education services. Our new legislation builds on the legacy and success of FDR’s New Deal to bring broadband access in rural America into the 21st century.”

Steel said she is appreciative of Huffman’s bill, adding that the lack of broadband options in Mendocino County impedes economic development and dampens the quality of life.

“Mendocino County has not had great success in federal grant funding for broadband infrastructure projects,” Steel wrote in an email. “By my calculations, our success rate for federal grants has only been 4.6 percent. (Recent Connect America Funding awards to Frontier and AT&T are not included in this percentage). In fact, we received another notice of rejection for an EPA broadband grant again just this morning. This lack of success is multi-faceted (including limiting eligibility), and so my hope is when the text of the legislation is developed some of these barriers and challenges can be addressed so as to make this grant funding available to the smaller providers who are trying to build out their networks in our county.”

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