

Strong participation in CPUC Public Hearing

By Trish Steel, Broadband Alliance

On behalf of the Broadband Alliance of Mendocino County, I'd like to thank Mendocino County for their strong participation in the first-ever California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) Public Participation Hearing that was held in Ukiah this past Friday July 15, 2016. The Board of Supervisors chambers was filled with government and public safety officials and residents, and we sent a strong message to the Commission that Mendocino County requires that our telecommunications networks, both legacy landline telephones and newer IP networks, be reliable and dependable. Commissioner Catherine Sandoval listened carefully to every speaker, often asking clarifying questions and making sure that the information was recorded correctly for follow-up.

The hearing was scheduled for 2:30 - 4:30 p.m., but due to the large number of speakers, continued until well after 6 pm. Unfortunately some speakers had to leave before they were called to speak. The hearing opened with comments by Senator Mike McGuire and Assemblymember Jim Wood, and then CPUC Commissioner Katherine Sandoval spoke on the background and reason for the proceeding. She thanked the county for the warm welcome, and for organizing a tour before the hearing to the site of the 2014 fiber break on the Comptche-Ukiah Road that led to large parts of the county losing telecommunication service for two days. She also noted that they observed conditions of the repaired line that were not in compliance with the commission General Order 95 which requires the lines to be in kept in good working order, and that under California law, Section 451 of PUC Code, the utilities have "an obligation to provide safe and reliable service, at just and reasonable rates with adequate facilities." She stated that they are here to listen and learn from us, and to create a record that their team can consider. She stressed the importance of the CPUC staff getting out of their office in San Francisco to understand the conditions throughout the State, and that they have been inspired to do so by hearing stories about the conditions in Mendocino County and people losing dial tone and the ability to access 911.

The public comment portion opened with county “heavy-hitters”, such as Fifth District Supervisor Dan Hamburg, Sheriff Tom Allman and public safety officials providing strong testimony for the need for reliable networks. Chair of the Mendocino County Fire Chiefs Association, Randy MacDonald, ended his testimony by asking several questions, including: “Is the policy of the state of California that rural lives are not as important as urban or suburban lives? How and when will state agencies ensure that telecommunications companies provide geographical equity in essential services?” Sheriff Allman opened his testimony thanking the commissioner for being here, and stated, “We’re glad that we’re not forgotten as a part of California ...sometimes rural counties often feel like the step-child where resources are expended.” A common theme in much of the testimony was that reliable communications are essential, as otherwise rural lives are put at risk. Another speaker reminded the commission that “Life-alerts do not work over VoIP and need a copper line...and that IP phones do not work in a power outage while right outside the house is a copper line that would.” Mendocino Coast District Hospital IT Director, Jeff Fox, testified that even though going to a cloud-based system for their Electronic Medical Records and other medical tools could save them probably over a million dollars, they are unwilling to do so due to the lack of network reliability that poses an unacceptable life-safety risk should they not be able to access those medical records and tools. Instead, they host and use local servers at a much higher cost than the cloud-based services. Fox concluded his testimony by saying that although the “vandals damaged the infrastructure; the outage itself was caused by AT&T because of their lack of willingness to get rid of their single points of failure.” A representative for the Luce Avenue Residents Alliance (Ukiah) spoke about the problems with their telephone and that they feel the AT&T advertising is false and should be addressed, along with the need for redundant and reliable networks. She told of how when her husband needed emergency care, she didn’t even bother with trying to use the phone (“I knew it would be out”) but instead put him in the car to drive to the hospital. The last speaker of the hearing told how his family was unable to get landline service for his home, although by law the telephone companies are required to provide this service.

Every speaker was articulate and shared their story and concerns; I encourage everyone to listen to the testimony for an understanding of what was conveyed to the commission. You can find a link to the hearing video on the Broadband Alliance website, along with a pdf with the list of speakers and the time, so that you can scroll through to a specific speaker if you wish.

<http://www.mendocinobroadband.org/topics/special-sessions/>

If you were not able to attend this hearing, or didn't know about it, please note that this proceeding is STILL OPEN, which means that written comments are still being accepted and can be submitted as part of the record. If you have a story to tell about your phone not being reliable or losing dial tone, then I encourage you to submit written comments. Include the Reference Proceeding Number I.14-05-012 and send to:

Public Advisors Office
California Public Utilities Commission
505 Van Ness Ave
San Francisco, CA 94102

Thanks again to everyone who helped plan and organize this hearing, and who took the time to attend and share their thoughts with the Commission.