

February 22, 2007 Minutes

MINUTES

STAFFORD COUNTY CABLE TELEVISION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

February 22, 2007

I. Call to Order.

The meeting was called to order by the chair, Jackie Hontz, at 7:10 p.m. in the Administrator's Conference Room in the Administration Center, 1300 Courthouse Road.

II. Roll Call.

The following members were present: Jackie Hontz, Alicia Knight, Terry Lottes, Danielle Davis and Thomas Kimbrell. Also present were Jaybo Johnson with Cox Communications, Marie Schuler with Comcast Communications, and Cathy Riddle and Michele Lansford representing the County.

III. Presentations by the Public.

Mr. Marty Lemus, 206 Revell Road, who attended the January 2007 meeting, asked the committee to continue its efforts to get cable service provided in his neighborhood (Potomac Run subdivision east of I95, off of Eskimo Hill Road, comprised of 50 homes on three-acre lots).

Ms. Schuler said the company is still surveying his subdivision, and will ask Mr. McNamara, a Comcast construction manager, for an update, and will call Mr. Lemus when she has more information.

Mr. Warren Lee, 1566 Truslow Road, said that in February he received a bill from Comcast reflecting an increase for Internet services from \$59.95 to \$67.95. He said that even when he changed to a slower Internet service speed, the charge went from \$42.95 to \$57.95. He also said that Comcast service representatives told him rates are set by local jurisdictions. Additionally, Mr. Lee said he objected to a more than \$19.00 charge for work on Comcast equipment located along the street after he reported a problem. He also pointed out that the phone number on Comcast bills to call for service is printed on the section that is mailed back with payments.

Ms. Hontz said that neither Stafford nor the committee has jurisdiction over Internet rates or other charges, but that the committee was concerned about the increase.

Ms. Schuler said Comcast does charge more for Internet service alone than when it is bundled with cable television programming, and that stand-alone Internet prices did increase. She also stated that the phone center personnel should not have said rates are set by localities, since that is not true. She said Mr. Lee should not have been billed for the trouble call, and that she would investigate and correct the charge.

Ryan Warren-Jensrud, 113 Norman Road, asked Ms. Schuler to determine if cable services can be provided to his street. He said his mother runs a business from their home, and he takes online courses – he said dial-up is too slow.

Ms. Schuler said she would be meeting with the construction manager for Stafford, and would ask him to survey the street to determine if the area meets the density requirement. Ms. Knight said she would like to accompany Mr. Riley and Mr. McNamara, Comcast engineers, when they visit the neighborhood to learn what is involved in completing a survey. Ms. Schuler said she would arrange it.

IV. Agenda Additions.

There were no additions to the agenda.

V. New Business.

The committee called Brian Grogan, the County's cable attorney, to discuss the revised Cable ordinance, the status of negotiations with Cavalier Cable, issues they could address as a telecommunications commission, and the status of the recent FCC ruling.

Mr. Grogan said he is revising the County's Cable Television Ordinance to reflect the new state statute, but he wants to wait to finalize it until he knows if Cavalier will seek an ordinance franchise or a negotiated franchise.

Ms. Hontz asked if the County is using its authority to regulate cable services under the current ordinance. Mr. Grogan said the current ordinance is in conflict with the State Code, and some sections of it are not enforceable.

A discussion ensued about franchise ordinances versus negotiated franchises, and how state ordinances reflect only 12 requirements that, while preserving PEG fees, do not offer as many benefits for customers as negotiated franchises.

Mr. Grogan told the committee that they can broaden the scope of telecommunications issues about which they wish to advise the Supervisors to whatever extent the Board desires. He said telecommunications commissions can research cable regulations, rights-of-way issues, cell tower sites and wireless Internet services.

Ms. Knight asked what authority the commission would have, and whether they could draft regulations. Mr. Grogan responded that members could recommend that the Board of Supervisors take certain actions. For example, on WiFi issues, they would research different strategies to make service available, and the Board would initiate contracts and determine financing sources.

Mr. Grogan said the committee would need to work with experts familiar with telecommunications issues, and be assisted by staff from the Department of Information Technology.

Mr. Lottes mentioned that the state had made grant money available to assist the more rural localities to establish new or make improvements to existing wireless Internet infrastructure.

When Ms. Hontz asked if there were a regional telecommunications effort, Ms. Riddle replied that there is one in place for emergency responders.

Mr. Grogan said that no actual FCC order has been issued yet that reflects the December 20, 2006, ruling affecting local authority over cable services. Among other things, the ruling forces localities to act within 90 days negotiate franchise agreements with existing providers, or within 180 days if there is “nothing in the ground.”

He said build-out requirements would allow companies like Verizon and AT&T to pick and choose what neighborhood they will serve. Also, it’s possible that states like Virginia could lose free service to schools and public buildings and PEG fees in some states (but not Virginia), although those points remains unclear.

Mr. Lottes asked if, by state ordinance, Stafford can pressure new cable companies to agree to local negotiated franchise agreements and enforce build-out requirements. Grogan replied that the County did that stipulate in the agreements with Cox and Comcast that they could overlap services, but weren’t required to. He said the state ordinance only requires that cable providers attain a certain percentage of build-out over a period of years; a density of 30 homes per mile; access to homes; and states that companies do not have to provide service when it is not “technically or economically feasible” to do so.

Mr. Lottes asked if Cavalier Cable can ask for an ordinance franchise now, and Mr. Grogan replied that they can. He said, however, that the County has received no official notice that they wish to apply for a state ordinance.

VI. Approval of Minutes.

Ms. Knight moved, and Mr. Lottes seconded, to approve the minutes of the January 25, 2007, meeting with two corrections: page 2, second paragraph, change “Drewery” to “Lottes,” and page 3, fifth paragraph, change “residences” to “residents.” The minutes were approved by acclamation.

VII. Members’ Concerns.

After reviewing the customer service reports, Mr. Lottes asked the company representatives to clarify the number of trouble calls completed. Mr. Johnson said the number reflected offers of same day or next day service for all trouble calls. Ms. Schuler said that Comcast also offers same day or next day service.

Ms. Davis stated that that was not the case. She said that when she was having trouble instituting cable service at her residence, the representative offered an appointment for three days after her call, and that the Manassas call center tells customers that same day or next day service is offered only if a technician is available.

Ms. Hontz and Ms. Knight said they had heard the same complaint. Ms. Hontz also said that the former chair of the Cable Committee, Mary Ann Thornburg, cannot get a Comcast representative to return her call about starting cable (VOIP) service.

Ms. Schuler said she would investigate both issues, and will call Ms. Thornburg.

Ms. Davis said the report indicated that the return call rate for Comcast is poor – that customer calls are not returned, and there's no follow-through.

Ms. Knight said that Mr. Ryan Warren-Jensrud's family had experienced the same problem. Ms. Knight also said there are ongoing e-mail transition problems.

Ms. Hontz said the reports don't reflect what Cable Committee members are hearing from constituents, and need to be more specific. Mr. Lottes agreed, and said the members had previously requested better reporting.

Ms. Schuler said she would work on changing the document.

Mr. Kimbrell asked what the figures for "calls abandoned" meant. Ms. Schuler said it reflected the number of callers who hang up before a representative answers.

Ms. Knight said she has been on hold for as long as 25 minutes, and then just hung up.

A discussion ensued about the fact that some of the figures in both the Comcast and Cox reports reflect statistics for other jurisdictions. When committee members asked if Stafford's figures could be broken out, both Ms. Schuler and Mr. Johnson replied that they could not, due to technical issues at the call centers and because some information is proprietary.

Ms. Schuler said she would try to determine how expensive it would be to pull certain numbers only for Stafford County.

Mr. Kimbrell asked her how the company tracks quality control problems if numbers aren't available for jurisdictions separately, and Ms. Davis asked how they track technical problems locally. Ms. Schuler replied that technical problems can be tracked to particular areas, to the "node" itself.

Ms. Davis asked how the company determines when technicians say they show up for trouble calls, but don't, and customers have to re-schedule.

Mr. Lottes said the report shows a total number of trouble calls for Stafford only, and that an address can be associated with the call.

Ms. Schuler said there is a number for general phone inquiries versus trouble calls. Mr. Kimbrell asked if trouble calls are logged when a work order is generated, and she replied in the affirmative.

Ms. Davis asked why call center personnel ask customers in what city they live. Ms. Schuler replied that it's because Stafford has a different "corporate" number than the customers in the databases at the Manassas and Louisiana call centers. Ms. Davis asked if a software program captures that information – Ms. Schuler replied that it's a "manual pick" by call representatives for Stafford customers.

Ms. Hontz asked if Ms. Schuler had prepared a report of all capital improvements completed and under construction in Stafford. Ms. Schuler replied that she had not, but would provide it as soon as possible via e-mail to all committee members.

Ms. Davis asked Ms. Schuler for an update about Mr. Walsky, 241 Windermere Drive, who was quoted a price of \$250,000 to have fiber run to his residents – Ms. Schuler said she would check on the status of his request. Ms. Davis and Ms. Knight said they would also like to go along when this survey is done. Ms. Davis said she would send an e-mail to Ms. Schuler about some specific complaints she's received about service outages and incorrect bills.

Mr. Lottes asked Ms. Schuler for an update on the construction plans for his neighborhood. She replied that engineers are working on it, and she will let him know. She said Comcast is receiving a tremendous number of requests for plant extensions. Ms. Knight asked for an update about extending service along Tacketts Mill Road to the Fauquier County line, and Ms. Schuler said she would provide one.

Committee members discussed ways to publicize the fact that Stafford has a Cable Committee. Ms. Riddle said a Web site dedicated specifically to the committee would be designed, with the meeting dates and times, the committee's mission, and contact information for members. Meeting agendas and minutes will also be posted on the Web.

Ms. Riddle also said the same information would be added to SCALA slides running on the two local government cable channels.

VIII. Adjournment.

At 8:50 p.m., Mr. Lottes moved to adjourn the meeting; Ms. Knight seconded; the motion passed unanimously.