

PA Telecommunications Task Force Kicks-Off in Harrisburg

The inaugural meeting of the Pennsylvania Telecommunications Task Force on March 18 in Harrisburg opened the door to new business opportunities for the over 100 business representatives who attended the conference, according to Kelly Lewis, the President and CEO of the Telecommunications Council of Central Pennsylvania, the sponsor of the event.

"One of our key missions is to help companies find ways to deploy broadband and other technologies," Lewis said. "There is a direct relationship between deployment of new technologies and new business growth."

To help foster that business growth, the Task Force will act as an information source and clearinghouse for business, government agencies, and local communities that all play a vital role in the advancement and deployment of broadband and other telecommunications technologies. Speaking at the conference, state Senator Robert Wonderling (R-Montgomery) Chair of the Senate Communications and Technology Committee, said that a group ought to be a place in which ideas and concepts percolate to the advancement of various technology industries, the advancement and creation of wealth and economic opportunity.

"We have to make it work...there is no alternative," Wonderling said.

Also supporting the new groups are the Broadband Cable Association of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Telephone Association, which is playing a key role in the implementation of the Chapter 30 renewal law, Act 183. Among other things, the new act carries financial incentives for incumbent phone companies to deploy broadband technologies in their coverage areas.

At its first meeting, the Task Force outlined for broad focus areas:

- *Gather ideas that help roll out new broadband, wireless and other telecommunications technologies;
- *Promote investments made by telecommunications companies to increase broadband access;
- *Help communities benefit from Act 183 provisions, including economic development sections of the new law that encourage deployment of broadband;
- *Find ways to help companies deploy broadband and other new technologies.

The Pennsylvania Telecommunications Task Force is a broader version of a regional group, the Pocono Telecommunications Task Force, started by Kelly Lewis and others business and community leaders when he represented Monroe County in the state House. The Pocono Group has had success not only in encouraging wireless, broadband technologies but also fighting the impediments to deployment, including the state and local tax structures. Wonderling, in fact, has introduced a measure in the Senate that would repeal the recently approved five percent gross receipts tax on cell phone usage.

The Task Force plans to meet again on April 26 at 9:00 a.m. in the Technology Council of Central Pennsylvania offices at on TecPort Drive in Harrisburg.

Broadband Deployment on Schedule, Telecom Industry Tells House Panel

Representatives of the state's incumbent phone carriers told the House Consumer Affairs Committee this week that the implementation of the Chapter 30 renewal language, signed into law by Governor Rendell last year (Act 183), was moving according to schedule. Act 183 outlines a plan to achieve statewide broadband deployment by requiring nearly all the incumbent carriers (ILECs) to file amended network modernization plans, or NMPs, with the Public Utility Commission (PUC). The NMPs detail how and when the companies will achieve full broadband deployment.

The companies have all filed their NMPs, and one from the Commonwealth Telephone Company, has been approved. Industry officials expect the other plans to be approved within the next few months.

"There's a 30 day public comment period and then the PUC has 100 days to review the plan," explained Tom Lager, the General Manager and Vice President of Operations for the Palmerton Telephone Company, which serves Monroe and Carbon Counties. "A lot of the plans are fairly similar so approval should move along quickly."

Along with Lager, representatives from Commonwealth Telephone, Verizon and the Pennsylvania Telephone Association (PTA) commented on Act 183. Steven J. Samara, Vice President of PTA, told the committee that the PTA and its member companies have undertaken various activities regarding Act 183 implementation:

Filed the Network Modernization plans for approval;

Met with PUC staff to discuss regulatory relief;

Met with various stakeholders to discuss how the Act 183 lifeline program changes are to be placed into effect;

Communicated with representatives from the Department of Community and Economic Development and local school districts on the Act 183 programs that will accelerate and target broadband advanced services deployment.

Telephone company officials, moreover, addressed an issue relating to municipal involvement in broadband deployment, which has created some confusion in the media, and among the public. The new act does not prohibit municipalities from deploying broadband as a municipal non-profit service. Only if it wants to enter a for-profit broadband deployment service, is a local municipality required to give the local phone carrier the right of first refusal.

Status of NMPs:

Four ILECs are so small that they have a waiver from the original Chapter 30 obligations:

Citizens Telecom of New York
Deposit Telephone Company
Hancock Telephone Company
West Side Telephone Company

Two ILECs are nonrural - Verizon PA and Verizon North. Both notified the Commission of their intent to file an amended plan under Option 3 which promises 100% broadband deployment 12-31-2015 and an inflation offset of 0.05%:

Two ILECs - United Telephone (Sprint) and Alltel have selected Option 2 which promises to broadband deployment of 80% by 12-31-2010 and 100% by 12-31-2013 and an inflation offset of 0.0%:

All the remaining ILECs elected Option 1 which promises 100% broadband deployment by 2008 and an inflation offset of 0%.

FCC EXTENDS TRUTH-IN-BILLING RULES TO WIRELESS PHONES; SEEKS COMMENT ON ADDITIONAL MEASURES TO INCREASE ABILITY OF CONSUMERS TO MAKE INFORMED CHOICES

The Federal Communications Commission has expanded the federal consumer protection rules that apply to consumers' wireless phone bills. It has also asked for comment on additional measures to facilitate the ability of telephone consumers to make informed choices among competitive telecommunications service offerings.

The actions come in response to consumer concerns with the billing practices of wireless and other interstate providers, outstanding issues from the FCC's 1999 Truth-in-Billing Order and a petition filed by the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates (NASUCA).

Specifically, the Commission:

Removed the existing exemption for Commercial Mobile Radio Service (CMRS) carriers from the rules requiring that billing descriptions be brief, clear, non-misleading and in plain language;

Held that it is misleading to represent discretionary line item charges in any manner that suggests such line items are taxes or government mandated charges;

Clarified that the burden rests upon the carrier to demonstrate that any line item that purports to recover a specific governmental or regulatory program fee conforms to the amount authorized by the government to be collected; and

Clarified that state regulations requiring or prohibiting the use of line items for CMRS constitute rate regulation and are preempted.

In a Second Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, the Commission:

Sought comment on the distinction between government "mandated" and other charges;

Tentatively concluded that, where carriers choose to list charges in separate line items on their customers' bills, government mandated charges must be placed in a section of the bill separate from all other charges;

Sought comment on whether it is unreasonable to combine federal regulatory charges into a single line item;

Tentatively concluded that carriers must disclose the full rate, including any non-mandated line items and a reasonable estimate of government mandated surcharges, to the consumer at the point of sale; and

Tentatively concluded that the Commission should preempt inconsistent state regulation of telecommunications carrier-specific truth-in-billing rules. The Commission emphasized, however, that no such action would limit states' ability to enforce their own generally applicable consumer protection laws.

CenturyTel Chief Urges Congress to Update Telecom Deregulation Law

The President and Chief Operating Officer of CenturyTel, Karen Puckett, has urged members of a key House subcommittee to update the nation's telecom laws and keep pace with today's rapidly changing communications market.

"Consumers and our economy urgently need a modern telecom policy that reflects today's realities and charts a constructive role for U.S. policy," Puckett told the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet. "This policy should safeguard ongoing priorities such as universal service and law enforcement needs and encouraging all companies in today's marketplace to continue making the investment necessary to develop and deploy innovative new choices, beyond just VoIP."

A member of the United States Telecom Association's Board of Directors, Puckett shared the industry's perspective at the Committee's hearing on how Internet Protocol-enabled services are changing voice communications.

Puckett explained that new and innovative services, like VoIP and switched digital video, are only possible because of significant investments by companies, like CenturyTel, to deploy advanced communications networks. She also stressed the urgent need for legislative action to ensure the future for universal service.

"Universal service remains a critical priority for the nation, especially for the people served by companies like CenturyTel that are committed to rural America," Puckett stated. "We can all be excited about advances such as IP, but we as a nation must not forget those people who need help just to have basic access to the security of a dial tone."

Verizon Again Expands Broadband Access

Consumers and businesses can enjoy the benefits of high-speed Internet access now that Verizon Online has expanded its availability in Dauphin County. As the result of the company's most recent expansion and upgrade of its local telecommunications network, Verizon Online DSL is now available on more than 1,100 additional lines in Dauphin County.

Verizon has invested \$8.5 billion in its network over the last 10 years and will continue to invest aggressively under recently enacted state telecom legislation. The new law requires companies such as Verizon to deploy broadband service across their service areas - the most comprehensive broadband deployment requirement in the nation. Under this legislation, Verizon also must make broadband available to all students throughout the company's Pennsylvania service area.

Currently, Verizon Online is offering its basic consumer DSL service for \$29.95 per month in an annual service plan or when purchased in combination with Verizon Freedom or another Verizon local or long-distance bundle. This service offers a maximum connection speed of 1.5 Mbps (megabits per second) downstream and 384 Kbps (kilobits per second) upstream. Verizon Online has also enhanced its DSL service by introducing a super-fast maximum Internet connection speed of 3 Mbps downstream and 768 Kbps upstream for as low as \$39.95 per month in an annual service plan or when purchased as part of a package of calling services. Consumer DSL customers who subscribe to an annual DSL plan from Verizon Online also receive a combination modem and "home gateway router" with the service.