

# Comcast switch raises public policy questions

If you're anything like me — a subscriber to Comcast's broadband cable network service who doesn't have a Ph.D. in computer science — last week was just hell on wheels.

It started with an e-mail from Comcast saying all former subscribers to MediaOne broadband were going to be switched over to Comcast's network on Dec. 29. Then I got a CD-ROM in the mail that I was supposed to use in making the conversion. It came with a set of instructions that were confusing at best, gibberish at worst. It took my wife, Kathy, who has a head for this sort of thing, about 45 minutes each to get our computers changed over. Turns out we were lucky, mostly because we don't get our e-mail through Comcast.

Of the 70,000 or so Comcast customers in southeastern Michigan, many still can't access their e-mail (not counting the thousands who were forced to change their e-mail addresses), some are experiencing erratically slower broadband speeds than on the old system and a few discovered they can't use their computers at all (the erroneous changeover instructions produced corrupted files).

Customers are still complaining about inadequate technical support and telephone help lines that were either forever busy or involved intolerable waits. Comcast's comments were dazzlingly self-serving; spokesman Rich Ruggerio was quoted as saying, "Frankly, we did underestimate a little bit the number of customers who would call with general questions." Sure.

I suppose Comcast eventually will get its service problems sorted out, although I'd sure hate to be one of the 110,000 Detroit@home users who will be switched to new network next month.

Consider, however, the public policy issues lurking in the background of this mess.

The fact of the matter is that when it comes to cable-delivered broadband service, Comcast is an unregulated monopoly. It's by far the dominant cable company in southeastern Michigan. But if you've got a beef about the level of broadband service you're getting from Comcast, you're essentially out of luck.

What regulation exists — and there's not much — is at the federal level. If you're in a hurry, I don't suggest trying to reach the friendly folks at

the Federal Communications Commission. As for your local municipality, forget about it. For years, cities and townships have been issuing franchises to cable companies, but the locals don't have the power to levy fines if the terms of the contract are not kept.

The legislation authorizing local cable franchises was passed years ago, before anybody ever imagined that cable lines could be used to deliver broadband services or that reliable access to the Internet was going to be essential for a lot of folks.

So is there any recourse available to the average guy who feels he got screwed? Maybe.

Through the office of the Michigan Attorney General, the Michigan Consumer Protection Act provides penalties for companies that promise one thing to their customers but don't deliver. Gena Gent, spokesperson for Jennifer Granholm, says their office has received 14 formal complaints immediately after the Comcast conversion started, and "that's likely just the start. We believe we have the authority to deal with unfair or misleading business practices, customers who were promised certain performance by their service provider but didn't get what was promised," says Gent.

On the horizon is proposed state legislation backed by Gov. John Engler that would create a government office to promote and oversee the spread of high-speed Internet service throughout the state.

The proposal has drawn a lot of fire from conservatives (not to mention telecom firms themselves), who claim it would create a "web tax" and turn the free market telecom industry into a regulated utility. Engler has responded by arguing that as a practical matter, there is no such thing as a free market for broadband in Michigan, which is largely dominated by big firms like Comcast and Ameritech.

I think Engler's right. Michigan should be on the cutting edge of the broadband revolution, not in the middle of the pack. And the chaos produced by the Comcast changeover merely confirms the danger of allowing an unregulated monopoly to control the market without customer recourse.

In the meantime, customers who are still having problems with their e-mail just might want to call the Attorney General's office in Lansing and ask about the Michigan Consumer Protection Act.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734)933-2047, ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@homecomm.net.



Jont Hubred

## Hills firefighters honored as hometown heroes

Ok beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife, who more than self their country loved and mercy more than life...

-- America the Beautiful

Farmington Hills Fire Chief Rich Marinucci takes a bit of teasing about his annual slide show, presented at the department's awards banquet.

I sat through the 2001 version Friday night, and to be honest, it did run a little long. Toward the end, I took Hills City Manager Steve Brock's advice and went to my "happy place" for a while.

Still, Marinucci sees a clear value in chronicling what his firefighters have done over the past year.

"Too often, you get caught up in the day to day, and you don't realize what a top shelf job we do every day," Marinucci said.

Evidence lies in the letters received from grateful citizens and in commendations even from people outside the community. A Grand Rapids physician praised the professionalism and dedication he witnessed after stopping to help at an accident scene.

"I worked as a firefighter paramedic with the Boca Raton Fire Department prior to going to medical school and I can say with certainty that any Fire Department in the world would be proud of the way your crew handled this situation," wrote Dr. Bruce Murray.

Nearly half of the more than 100 men and women who are career or paid, on-call firefighters are received awards this year. Most were for the dramatic part of their work — saving lives. Four "Chain of Survival" and eight "Life Saving" awards recognized efforts that led to a dozen citizens getting a second chance at life.

But there's something else about these folks, some measure of strength and courage, that makes them all special.

It's the spark that touched them all Sept. 11, as fellow firefighters in New York died in valiant attempts to save people trapped in the World Trade Center. In a video recounting the department's "Bridge to Bridge" fundraiser, a walk from the Ambassador Bridge in Detroit to the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City, firefighters Jim Etzin and Dennis Hughes talked about a bond that surpasses common understanding.

"The brotherhood of the fire service is unlike any other in the world," Hughes said.

That connection among firefighters, Etzin added, leads them to reach out when a brother or sister is in trouble. "All firefighters are compelled to do what they can," he said.

Those who made the walk, supported by the entire department, were deeply touched by the experience.

To those whose lives they've saved, who have benefited from their professionalism, even those who have needed nothing more than the comfort of knowing help is only a phone call away, (they) will always be valued and appreciated,

"It's something I can pass onto my children," said Derek Smith. "It's a tragedy everybody will remember. It's an experience I'll never forget."

Jeremy Dougherty recalled passing through one small town where school children lined the route and shouted their support. Tom Shurtliff talked about officials in Scranton, Pa., where the walkers needed a lot of support on a route that was largely interstate freeway.

Larry Gauthier talked about the New York fire station where their journey ended. As they sat in the kitchen, he noticed pictures of the station members, many of whom lost their lives Sept. 11, celebrating a summer party.

"It just really put together for me the importance of life. You could just feel in that house, it wasn't the same," he said.

The devastation, the loss and the tremendous spirit they saw might make local firefighters think what they do every day is very small by comparison.

But to those whose lives they've saved, who have benefited from their professionalism, even to those who have needed nothing more than the comfort of knowing help is only a phone call away, Farmington Hills firefighters — and Farmington Public Safety Officers — will always be valued and appreciated, now more than ever.

Mayor Nancy Bates put it best: "We all sleep a little better at night because of the fact that you know what you know and do what you do. You are our hometown heroes."

Jont Hubred is editor of the Farmington Observer. She welcomes your comments by phone (248) 477-5450; mail, 33411 Grand River, Farmington MI 48336; fax (248) 477-9722; or e-mail jhubred@oe.homecomm.net

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