BEFORE THE IDAHO PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION

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| IN THE MATTER OF THE PETITION FROM MAGIC VALLEY RESIDENTS REQUESTING EXTENDED AREA SERVICE (EAS) AMONG THE COMMUNITIES LOCATED IN THE COUNTIES OF JEROME, TWIN FALLS, LINCOLN AND GOODING. | )  )  )  )  )  )  ) | CASE NO. GNR-T-95-5  NOTICE OF PETITION  ORDER NO.  26298 |

In September 1995, the Commission received petitions containing more than 13,000 signatures requesting toll-free calling among the communities located in Jerome, Twin Falls, Lincoln and Gooding Counties.  Toll-free calling between and among local exchanges is usually provided via a service arrangement known as extended area calling (EAS).  Approximately 75% of Idaho’s local exchanges have toll-free EAS(footnote: 1)  calling to other exchanges.  Local exchange service in the four counties is provided by several telephone companies and cooperatives including:  U S WEST Communications, Gem State Utilities, Filer Mutual Telephone, and Project Mutual Telephone Cooperative.  Upon its own motion, the Commission initiates this proceeding to examine the reasonableness of establishing regional EAS routes in the Magic Valley.

NOTICE OF PETITION

YOU ARE HEREBY NOTIFIED that the petitions generally assert that the four counties are “one community in a regional area environment.”  The petitions maintain that toll-free EAS calling will:  (1) encourage the local economies; (2) ease access to the “information highway”; (3) eliminate toll charges when calling doctors, hospitals, county seats, sheriffs, schools, teachers and government agencies; and (5) enhance communications between school children and their parents.

YOU ARE FURTHER NOTIFIED that the petitions assert that existing discounted toll plans available to customers in the Magic Valley do not offer viable calling alternatives.  In particular, the petitions state that the value of the existing U S WEST discount toll plan (METROPAC) has been eroded.

 YOU ARE FURTHER NOTIFIED that the petitions also request that U S WEST “make available, within one year, all services it now offers to its other customers (i.e., Caller-ID & Star 69)(footnote: 2) and make immediately available any future services.”  The petitions maintain that the unavailability of certain customer services offered by U S WEST “are a safety concern, especially to the elderly who receive ‘crank’ and ‘obscene’ calls.”

DISCUSSION

In June 1993, the Commission initiated Case No. GNR-T-93-13 to investigate the need for toll-free EAS throughout the state.  Order No. 24975 directed the Commission Staff to undertake a comprehensive review of the issues underlying EAS Petitions.  Pursuant to that Order, the Staff evaluated over 300 toll routes in Idaho not including GTE’s market area in northern Idaho.  The Staff filed its report in November 1994.  The report examined the status of local calling areas in Idaho, the need for expansion or alteration of these areas, and the financial and competitive impacts of possible changes to these areas.

The Commission convened a public hearing on August 17-18, 1995, to review the Staff report and receive public testimony and evidence from several other parties.  The purpose of the hearing was to establish a set of standards or criteria to evaluate when EAS should be implemented, what costs should be considered when selecting EAS routes, and whether toll competition is a viable alternative to local EAS calling.  Finally, the Commission also received testimony on the appropriateness of implementing regional EAS areas.

The Commission has completed hearings on the first phase of the statewide investigation and expects to decide what criteria will be used to evaluate EAS requests within the next few weeks.  Once the Commission has issued its EAS Order, it intends to begin the process of applying the new criteria to requests for EAS, including the present Petition.  Although we now initiate this proceeding to evaluate the need and reasonableness of establishing regional EAS routes in the four counties of the Magic Valley, we will not schedule hearings or direct a specific investigation to commence until after the Order on the first phase of the EAS investigation is issued.

The petitioners also request that the Commission direct U S WEST to provide the same services that the Company currently offers to other customers.  This request is more problematic for three reasons.  First, as previously mentioned, U S WEST is not the only local exchange company serving this area.  Several communities (e.g., Hollister, Filer, Richfield) are served by the other exchange companies/cooperatives.  Second, the Commission does not exercise regulatory jurisdiction over the telephone cooperatives of Filer and Project Mutual.  Idaho Code § 61-104.  In addition, the Commission has limited authority over the custom calling services (e.g., Caller-ID) provided by U S WEST.

Finally, the availability of custom calling features such as Caller-ID and Star 69 is contingent upon the type of central office switch in each exchange and whether the switch is equipped with specific network control systems.  For example, the U S WEST switch in Jerome does not have the capability to provide Caller-ID and other advanced custom calling features.  Once this case gets underway, we will require that the local service providers advise us of their abilities to provide custom calling services to Magic Valley customers.  In the meantime, we encourage customers to make their desires for additional customer services known to their local service provider.

O R D E R

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED that this proceeding be initiated on the Commission’s own Motion to consider the reasonableness of providing EAS among the communities located in Jerome, Twin Falls, Lincoln and Gooding Counties.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that U S WEST, Gem State, Project Mutual, and Filer Mutual be made parties to this case.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that further proceedings in this case will be held in abeyance until the Commission issues its final Order in the statewide EAS investigation, Case No. GNR-T-93-13.

DONE by Order of the Idaho Public Utilities Commission at Boise, Idaho this                  day of  January 1996.

RALPH NELSON, PRESIDENT

MARSHA H. SMITH, COMMISSIONER

DENNIS S. HANSEN, COMMISSIONER

ATTEST:

Myrna J. Walters

Commission Secretary

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**FOOTNOTES**

1:

“Toll-free” EAS is something of a misnomer because the costs associated with converting a former long-distance toll route to a toll-free EAS route are usually recovered from the affected customers by increasing their flat rates for local service.

2:

Caller-ID is a custom calling (CLASS) service offered by U S WEST that displays to a called party the telephone number or the number and name of the caller.  “Star 69” is another CLASS feature that allows a customer to return the call of the last caller by dialing star-6-9 on the telephone keypad.