News from the Oklahoma Corporation Commission

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COMMISSION RECEIVES HUNDREDS OF COMPLAINTS FROM BELL’S CUSTOMERS OVER ANNOUNCEMENT IT WILL ELIMINATE UNLIMITED FLAT RATE “LOCAL PLUS” AND “ONE-PLUS TOLL SAVER” PLANS

Chairman Bode promises a Thorough Hearing with Serious Consideration of all Evidence before Changing or Eliminating any Calling Plan

(OKLAHOMA CITY) – They are coming in by e-mail, phone call, card and letter. Hundreds of complaints from rural Oklahomans afraid of losing their long distance savings plan with Southwestern Bell. It was early August when Bell sent postcards and letters to customers of its “Local Plus” and “One Plus Saver Direct” plans telling them that it would eliminate the plans by October 15 and replace them with another plan involving a fixed number of flat rate minutes followed by a per minute charge. Within a few days the deluge of complaints began and continues.

Chairman Denise Bode stated “We will have a hearing on the Bell application and give serious consideration to all of the evidence presented before we reach any decision to modify or discontinue a calling plan that has benefited so many Oklahomans.”

While complaints have come from dozens of small towns and cities in every area of the state, one of the towns with the most complaints has been Rush Springs. Out of the 142 complaining e-mails and letters received so far by Jim Palmer, the Commission’s Director of Information, more than 44 towns and counties are represented with more than 20 percent of the complaints from Rush Springs and the nearby rural area.

“Each e-mail I receive regarding the long distance plans is forwarded to the Commission’s Public Utilities Division and General Counsel’s office for placement in the public comment file and for reference by the Commissioners and staff,” said Palmer.

Offices of all three Commissioners and the agency’s Consumer Services Division have also received hundreds of complaints. Commissioner Bob Anthony’s office has received more than 450 total complaints by e-mail, phone, letter and cut-out forms from newspapers. A large number of the complaints received by Anthony have come from Seminole, Wewoka, Konawa and Maud. Chairman Denise Bode’s office

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indicates it has received more complaints on this issue than any other. It reports about 120 phone and e-mail complaints and Commissioner Ed Apple’s office at least 100. Bill Burnett, Director of Consumer Services, says his office has fielded 208 complaints.

This is a particularly sensitive issue with rural residents who do not have access to wide area calling like the major metropolitan areas of Oklahoma City and Tulsa.

One customer writes “I live in Rush Springs where the area code is 580. The county seat, Chickasha, is in the 405 area code…I already feel an unjust burden has been placed on those of us who live in southern Grady county by the redrawing of the area code map. We feel left out and unwanted by Southwestern Bell. Having to pay extra for telephone service to our county seat already upsets me.”
Another Rush Springs area resident writes “I am extremely disturbed that Southwestern Bell is trying to discontinue the local plus calling plan. I live in a town where every call is long distance without it.”

A third complaint reads “I live in Rush Springs. The only means to internet services without huge phone bills is the Local Plus plan with Southwestern Bell. The people in this area can’t afford phone bills of $100 or $200 per month. The only means our school children have to the internet is with the Local Plus.”

Others say “Our calling plan is vital to our everyday life.” A disabled customer says “I am home bound so I often talk with my family long distance.”

The flat rate calling plans used by rural customers were modeled after similar plans in surrounding states following complaints from Oklahoma customers to Southwestern Bell and the Corporation Commission. Those complaints resulted in discussions on how best to provide a flat rate long distance service for rural customers who must make frequent long distance calls because they live outside of wide-area-calling. In 1998, the Commission ordered implementation of the flat rate toll saver plans on a test basis. They have been in effect since then. The announcement of their proposed elimination and what might replace them is still subject to review and order by the Commission.

No hearing date has been set for the Commission’s review of Southwestern Bell’s application.

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