



Free Press Viewpoint

Phone regulators among the abusers

Regulators who are supposed to protect consumers from unfair treatment at the hands of telecommunications companies seem to be not watchdogs, but in fact, running with the wolf pack.

Don't believe it? Take a good look at your next cellular or landline telephone bill.

On a typical landline bill in Kansas, for instance, you'll find that as much as a quarter of the entire bill goes not to pay for your phone service, but to pay taxes and special fees which may or may not benefit the guy who uses the line.

The lion's share of this money, about \$5.30 per line, goes to something called the "Federal Subscriber Line Charge," which is not a tax, but a charge paid directly to the service provider, AT&T in this case. This fee is not regulated by the states, as are basic charges, but the Federal Communications Commission caps it at \$6.50 per line.

While it may look official, it's just a way for the phone company to inflate the bill to pay for "costs." It's a scam, in other words, and some consumer web sites report the companies will sometimes waive the charge when someone complains enough.

Next-biggest fee is the Kansas Universal Service Fee, about \$4 a line, which is supposed to help pay for better service in "rural" areas. A Federal Universal Service Fee is similar, but less than half as much, \$1.75 per line. These are established by state and federal law.

We've never figured out what actual good these fees do us out here in rural territory who might be happier with lower bills. One multi-million-dollar project which got a federal loan involves a cooperative telephone company building a new system in Hays and area towns, places that already have good phone and Internet service.

Competition is good, yes, but should users of a phone service be taxed to pay for it? Couldn't the phone companies just get a loan?

We say Congress and the states should eliminate these charges.

Then there is the Special E911 Tax, a state levy which collects money used to "modernize" county and city dispatch operations. While these are vital, we wonder if the tax isn't a little high at 75 cents per line. When legislators questioned this, and tried to reduce the fee last year, county commissioners screamed bloody murder.

There was no one there to represent telephone users, however.

If you live in town, you may pay a "Special Municipal Charge," basically a city tax or franchise fee. This comes to 75 cents a line on our bill, but cities have taxed phone bills for years.

"Ordinary" taxes, state and federal, amount to roughly \$3.60, and the \$10 in "Surcharges and Other Fees" makes that seem cheap.

In some ways, your cellular bill is worse. The surcharges are lower, but cellular companies charge made-up fees that pad their bills.

Our carrier assesses a "regulatory cost recovery fee" and a "telecom connectivity fees," totaling \$1.15 per line. If you read the fine print, these supposedly represent real costs of doing business, but "(these) are not a government mandated tax or surcharge."

In other words, they're just part of what you pay to use your cell phone. They mean a \$10 add-on line really costs \$11.15 plus taxes and required fees. And that amounts to deceptive advertising.

Otherwise, cell users pay lower fees than land lines – the 911 tax is only 50 cents per line though cell phones make most of the 911 calls today, and state and local taxes run about 8 percent. Universal service charges are 4 to 5 percent for the state and the federal funds, again with no perceived real benefit to rural cell phone users.

What to do? Demand that your legislators reduce the 911 tax, for starters. Pressure Congress and the state to eliminate "rural service" fee. Same for the "subscriber line charge."

And write the Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Trade Commission and ask that phone companies be required to advertise, in big type, the real price of their service. Make them add the phony surcharges into the advertised price.

Phone service would be a lot cheaper – at least easier to understand – if, instead of going along, government put a stop to this folderol. Consumers deserve as much. – Steve Haynes

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ON THE WORLD HERALD
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New driver forgets to call parent

A co-worker was halfway between worry and frustration last week when her 16-year-old daughter did not call when she was supposed to.

This is one of those things that happens to almost all parents of new drivers.

You tell 'em and tell 'em and tell 'em, and still they don't seem to get it that you worry when they're on the road by themselves.

In this case, the newly licensed driver had permission to visit some friends at a summer camp about three hours from home. She had promised to stop halfway there and call home and again when she arrived. She had promised to do the same on the way back.

The trip to camp went as planned, with the promised phone calls, but when she left to head home her mind must have been on getting home and not on calling her (sigh) mother.

So Mom was at work, checking her cell phone every 10 minutes debating on whether to call her errant child or just worry herself silly. She wanted to call so badly, but thought that might distract the young driver, and that would be bad.

By the time her daughter showed up, her mother wasn't sure if she wanted to hug her or strangle her.

A short lecture ensued, and another teenage sigh.



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

Oh yes, I remember those days.

I don't remember too many problems with oldest daughter. She got her license and we sold her the old company station wagon for a fair-market price. It was about all she could afford, and we knew that, ugly as it was, it had been well maintained.

The second child was a completely different problem.

She learned to drive and bought her first car at 15. She had no license, so she would drive her brother up and down our longish driveway every other day or so.

She went off to summer camp and turned 16 there. The day she returned, she took her test and got her license. She was legal and ready to go in her little red Festiva.

Less than a month later, she got her chance. We moved from Colorado to Kansas – an eight-hour drive. We loaded her car with clothes, a white cat, her pet rabbit and her little brother.

Then when we started to load the truck with the rest of what would be the first of several loads, she took off.

Our plan had been to caravan to Kansas. She apparently hadn't gotten that message, and this was in the days before everyone had a cell phone.

We didn't see or hear from any of them until we got to Oberlin, about two hours behind the speedy Festiva.

I didn't feel too bad the following year when she again loaded her brother into the little red car and headed for camp in Estes Park, Colo.

I don't think she's ever had an accident, but there have been several speeding tickets over the 16 years since then.

But, soon, sooner than we can imagine, we'll get our revenge when baby Taylor gets her license and takes off, much to her parents chagrin, forgetting to call.

My friend at work still has a few years and an 8-year old son to go through before she can breathe a sign of relief, but they'll all make it. I'm just sure of it.

Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of Nor'West Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes @ nwkansan.com

Census a help, not an invasion

As the time for the 2010 Census winds down, one of the most difficult parts is still ahead of us.

A lot of people, it seems, want to stand by the Constitution, but want to ignore the part that requires a census every 10 years.

"It's none of their business," these people say, so they refuse to be counted.

Thomas County and the five surrounding counties need to wake up!

With the current numbers of returns coming in at only 70 percent for Thomas, Logan and Sheridan counties, 66 for Wallace, 64 for Sherman at 64 and 72 for Gove, that means figures could show about an average of 30 percent fewer people living in the five counties.

That isn't good news.

Our representation in Washington and Topeka hangs on the population, and we already aren't happy with the shift of power east, so by refusing to comply with the Constitution – by not returning the Census forms – we willfully impose less representation on ourselves.

If Thomas County ends up with its current 70 percent return, and the 2000 return gave us a count of 7,000 people, then a 70 percent return this go-round would mean 2,100 fewer people in all of Thomas County. That would mean 4,900 are counted for the whole county, actually less than the population of Colby!

It can mean as much as \$1,250 lost for each person not counted, and over the 10 years until



Vera Sloan

• After Thoughts

the next census, that adds up to \$2.5 million.

Money for schools, roads, senior citizens' centers, food for the elderly, tornado sirens, emergency medical services, programs for families in need and many other programs would be much less; and what is rightfully our money would be funneled to areas that show a greater population. So by not returning census forms, we have just shot ourselves in the foot for getting our piece of the pie, by a huge percentage.

By law, electoral districts must be redrawn every 10 years according to population. When we choose to ignore the census, we shoot ourselves in the foot for representation in Washington. The smaller the count, the smaller the voice.

Are we getting the picture?

The feds have \$400 billion (yes, with a B) each year to spend on infrastructure and services. That adds up to \$4 trillion the government will be sending to communities over the course of the next 10 years. We need our piece

of the pie and our fair share, and we won't get it by keeping our population a secret. If we're not smart enough to be counted, then we come up with the short end of the stick – again!

Information from the census is protected by federal law. No one can get access to your census data. It is rock-solid secure.

By law, the Census Bureau cannot share the respondent's answers with anyone. Not the IRS, the FBI, the CIA, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, or any other agency, period!

Census workers are going out for the last time in August, and have only a couple of months to make sure everyone gets counted, before tallying the figures that must be in the hands of the president by Dec. 31.

Those who may not have a census form, or haven't turned one in yet, or maybe haven't even gotten one, should call (800) 682-2010. A census worker will call on them and help fill out the form. By law, it can't be shared with anyone for 72 years.

Out of desperation for grant dollars, north-west Kansas should aim for at least an 85 to 90 percent return. Compare our paltry counts to Ellis County at 83 percent. We can do it, too.

Vera Sloan thinks life should be fun, and enjoys all the parts of it she sees as Society Editor.

Where to write, call

U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts, 109 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-4774

U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback, 303 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-6521

U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran, 2202 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515. (202) 225-2715

State Rep. Jim Morrison, State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St. Room 274-W, Topeka, Kan. 66612. (785) 296-7676 e-mail: jmorriso@ink.org

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

