

AT&T wants to dismantle all telephone lines in the entire country

In a note to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the telecom company AT&T asks the commission to mandate the total dismantling of all telephone landlines in the entire United States.

The note was filed with the FCC on December 21, 2009 as a comment to the National Broadband Plan (GN Dockets 09-51, 09-137 and 09-47). The note stated that 22% of American households have already cut their landline and rely exclusively on cell phones for their telephone service. The number of residential phone lines has fallen from 139 million lines to 75 million (though most of that reduction is probably the elimination of second lines for fax and dialup internet). Meanwhile, 66% of households subscribe to broadband (fast internet) service and 86% own a cell phone.

AT&T sees the trend of fewer households using regular telephones as continuing, with the local phone companies eventually being unable to afford maintaining their phone system for the remaining subscribers.

The company suggests that the FCC speed up the transition to wireless and internet-based phones by setting a firm date for eliminating all landlines in the entire country. The company believes such a sunset date would free up money for extending fast internet service to rural areas.

AT&T uses the recent conversion to digital TV, and the earlier transition from analog to digital cell phones, as examples to follow.

Commentary

Telephone service is essential to everyone, especially people with disabilities, for whom it may be their only link to the world. This link is now in danger.

With the removal of regular phone service, the only alternative in many rural areas is cell phones. In more populated areas, it may also be possible to use digital (VoIP) phones connected to landline internet connections (such as DSL).

Many people with environmental illness are hypersensitive to the radiation from cell phones and digital electronics, making them unable to use these alternative phone types. Some may be able to use them briefly, but not for long phone calls, and may also need to keep them turned off when not used, so they cannot receive incoming calls.

2 AT&T wants to dismantle all telephone lines

The dismantling of the regular phone system will leave people without telephone service, often people who are disabled and who have a low income.

The growing use of wireless communication is a public health issue of possibly staggering proportions, which is likely to take decades to fully manifest and become apparent.

Like the tobacco industry, the cell phone industry keeps producing reports that show there are no health problems, while independent research paints a different picture.

Once the public is fully aware of the health risks, they will wish to wean themselves off their cell phones, just as they did with tobacco. However, with the landlines gone, they may not have that choice any longer. Once the lines are abandoned, it will be very costly to restore them. It simply will not happen.

Forcing people to use their cell phones more will benefit the cell phone providers, such as AT&T. According to some sources, it costs 80% less to provide cell service compared to landline service. A cost savings that is not passed on to the consumers, who are used to paying premium prices for cellular service. Cell phone service is not regulated like regular phone service, and it is unlikely to become more regulated, so there will be fewer protections of the customers in the future.

The telephone landlines may eventually be phased out in any case, if more people vote by moving to exclusively rely on cell phones. However, some already prudently limit the use of their cell phone, and hopefully more will do so as the true health impact becomes more known. Hopefully the dismantling can be delayed long enough.

Any phase-out should be voluntary for each telephone company. A mandatory phase-out is a gift to the cell phone companies, simply taking business away from smaller telephone companies.

AT&T claims in their comment that it is much simpler for a cell phone operator to route calls through interstate trunk lines than it is for a landline telephone company. This difference is due to different regulations, according to AT&T. If this is true, that could be fixed by the FCC, and is not a good reason to dismantle the telephone system.

This subject needs to be debated publicly and really thought through, not suddenly mandated without the public being aware of its implications.

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