

Dear Council Member:

Ten months ago I shared with you my disappointing customer service experience with Comcast in trying to have internet service restored following my neighbor's tree falling into my yard and compromising both the cable connection and power line. (See below.) I noted the extreme differences in response time by the regulated electric utility versus the cable provider, and suggested that the ongoing negotiations with Comcast over a new franchise agreement was the ideal time to leverage meaningful customer service improvements, including the ability to contact someone located in St. Paul during business hours and a restoration of service guarantee when outages occur.

So imagine my surprise in learning that the proposed cable franchise extension that will have its third reading tomorrow evening before the Council has no changes in the customer service expectations and, as far as I can tell, no ability to contact a customer support person based in St. Paul during business hours (other than going to a Comcast service center) and no significant penalties if Comcast fails to address a customer complaint in a timely manner.

As council members must be aware, Comcast is notorious for its legendary poor customer service—see the links below, revealed from a routine survey of the internet—yet when, as a city, we have a chance to leverage meaningful reform in customer service standards for our community, we do nothing. Why?

<http://bgr.com/2014/09/24/why-is-comcast-so-bad-20/>

<https://www.yahoo.com/tech/s/comcast-customer-bad-might-end-undoing-twc-merger-133043483.html>

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2014/07/15/331681041/comcast-embarrassed-by-the-service-call-making-internet-rounds>

And what about the digital divide? How are the paltry 10% discounts that the city has negotiated with Comcast for seniors and low income individuals going to make a dent in the lack of high speed access (or no access) for the thousands of families that are unable to meaningfully participate in the digital economy or information superhighway because of the lack of competition for internet services in our city?

According to information provided at a Community Needs Assessment focus group session in 2013, Comcast's franchise agreement with St. Paul will generate nearly \$51,500,000 annually in cable revenues for the company and perhaps another \$35,000,000 per year from internet and telephone services—yet council members think limiting public comment to a one-time slot on a weekly agenda is adequate?

To date, the Council has held no public hearings to assess the community's feelings about Comcast—or what citizens might think about a ten-year agreement with a monopoly provider at a time when technology continues to evolve at breathtaking speeds and the lines between cable, phone, and internet services become more and more blurred.

From what I can tell, the primary motivation for extending the cable franchise agreement is an upgrade of the city's I-Net and the 5% franchise fee that will go to the general service fund where the money may be spent on a myriad of projects that have nothing to do with improving broadband access for the entire community. And while the 2.5% PEG fee that will largely be dedicated to SPNN operations is certainly valuable, the long-range implications of a contract negotiated behind closed doors deserves far more public scrutiny than has been allowed thus far.

During the past several years there has been a general lack of transparency around so many issues involving high stakes financial implications for the city, and the lip service given to public input is simply not acceptable. Approving a franchise extension at this point does nothing to address the significant customer service issues with Comcast—and is a disservice to the community at large. Please reconsider your vote. Thank you.

Respectfully,

Tom Goldstein

-----Original Message-----

**From:** Tom Goldstein

**Sent:** Tuesday, April 29, 2014 1:52 PM

**To:** 'Reardon, Mike (CI-StPaul)'

**Cc:** 'Lantry, Kathy (CI-StPaul)'; 'Stark, Russ (CI-StPaul)'; 'dan.bostrom@ci.stpaul.mn.us'; 'dai.thao@ci.stpaul.mn.us'; 'chris.tolbert@ci.stpaul.mn.us'; 'amy.brendmoen@ci.stpaul.mn.us'; 'dave.thune@ci.stpaul.mn.us'; 'tarek.tomes@ci.stpaul.mn.us'

**Subject:** Comcast Service Problems

Mike:

I wanted to share with you some recent experiences I have had with Comcast that I would argue are nowhere near acceptable for a company that is operating with a cable franchise in this city—and that make a mockery of all those commercials we see on TV touting the great level of customer service the company claims to provide. I think these concerns are especially relevant at a time when a new franchise agreement remains under negotiation and our window for ensuring that an acceptable level of customer service will soon close.

On Sunday afternoon, my neighbor's tree fell into my yard, taking down the power line and snapping the cable connection. At approximately midnight, Xcel Energy made it out, cleared the power line from the debris, and re-established the electrical connection. Shortly afterward, I contacted Comcast to arrange to have my cable service restored. As expected, I reached someone overseas in the Philippines, who went through the standard checklist reading off a script even though I explained that the line from the pole to my house had been separated. Eventually the customer service rep understood that it was not a technical issue, and told me they would have someone out by Wednesday at 10:00 a.m. Since that was three days from the time of the incident, I stopped by the Xfinity store in Highland to see if I could have the process expedited, given that I work out of my home and am essentially shut down without Internet service. While there, I was informed by one of the store reps that the service rep in the Philippines had put in the wrong code and that actually the soonest they could have someone out was May 12<sup>th</sup>. I was incredulous. I suspect that power companies would get service established quicker than that if we had a natural disaster, but here we have Comcast saying it will take two weeks to re-establish my service when they're regularly selling new service in which they can have people up and running in as soon as two days. Clearly, this is not acceptable.

I also want to share with you a previous situation with Comcast that underscores the conscious decision by them to not put a level of resources into this market that ensures we have an adequate level of service. About a month ago, the cable box on my TV went kaput. It was a standard Motorola unit, about 5x7 size, that I've had since I originally signed up for service with Comcast about six years ago. As instructed, I went to the Highland store to pick up a replacement. Unfortunately, they did not have that size available, they said, because "Comcast doesn't send us those anymore." So, what they gave me was a VCR-sized unit that appeared to be an older model and one that I was concerned was obsolete, let alone one that would not fit on the top of my older TV. No, I was assured, this was a current model that would work fine.

Long story short, I took the unit home, set it up, and found that system ran very slow, i.e., the signal lagged behind the remote, sort of like having dial-up versus high speed Internet. Certainly not the end of the world, but obviously not ideal if you're scrolling through a menu to watch a program. When, after much haggling, I was able to get a call to Comcast transferred stateside to somebody in the US with a tech background, the rep told me that the unit was probably not fully compatible with my TV and that he would send me a replacement unit, though he couldn't guarantee that it would be identical to the original unit that stopped working. As might be expected, I received the exact same replacement model as before, the large, VCR-size model. I figured it would do no good to plug this model in, since the results would be

the same, but Comcast told me that maybe the new equipment was defective and that I should try the 2<sup>nd</sup> replacement. So I went through the process of reinstalling the 2<sup>nd</sup> model, only to have the same problem. Comcast's solution was to schedule a service visit, but when I questioned the \$50 charge I was notified of by email, I was told that it was my responsibility. I told Comcast I wasn't going to pay for a problem that I had not caused, and took the replacement equipment back to the local Xfinity store. While there, I had a half hour discussion about the problems I was experiencing and at some point a supervisor walked out and informed the rep that they now had in stock the box I had been seeking. When I got home and set that box up, all the problems disappeared.

What I left out in the above recap is that I spent two hours on the phone with various Comcast reps, almost all of them based in the Philippines (no matter what time of day or night I called the local Comcast number), who would simply follow a standard script no matter what I told them or even when I explained that I had already gone through the various procedures of unplugging the equipment, having a new signal sent, etc. I want to be clear that my repeated reference to the call center in the Philippines is not a criticism of those hard working, poorly-paid individuals, but to point out that those folks are clearly not getting the kind of training that actual Comcast employees in the US are receiving, because some of the problems were caused due to incorrect codes being entered, wrong information being given out, etc. But it also underscores the fact that rather than providing jobs in St. Paul and allowing customers to deal directly with people on the ground in our city, calls are now routinely being routed overseas or to Mexico. In fact, I believe the only way to get someone in the U.S. is by calling Comcast and indicating you wish to downgrade or upgrade your service.

I brought all of these concerns to the store manager in Highland who informed me that U.S. employees were "too expensive" and that's why Comcast had its overseas call network, and that she herself didn't mind having to spend a lot of time on the phone with a rep if it would solve a problem. I told her that I expected the company to properly train individuals so that they could solve problems, and that much of my time on the phone was due to being placed on hold. I also told her that I was not happy with all of the inconvenience I had been caused because of her company's business decisions about how they deployed resources, including having to come into the Xfinity Store three times simply because they didn't have the right equipment in stock and there is no way to call the store directly. After haggling for half an hour in her office, the manager eventually agreed to give me a \$100 credit because I refused to accept 3 months of free premium service in return for my inconvenience, but I suspect the main reason I got even that amount is because the manager didn't want someone in her store complaining in front of other customers about Comcast's poor service and cost shifting at the expense of the public.

I wanted you to have the full story because I believe there needs to be minimal standards in place for a cable franchisee in St. Paul, including proper equipment available, the ability to call someone directly in St. Paul during normal business hours, and a restoration of service guarantee except when there is a major weather event or natural disaster. Unfortunately, employees at the Comcast store suggested to me that two weeks was a normal expectation for having "outside" work done for cable service, and if that is so, then we're living in the dark ages.

I was told that the manager was going to expedite my case yesterday, but no one from Comcast has contacted me. I have now been without Internet and cable service for the past 48 hours with no idea when it will be restored. (I'm currently working out of a friend's home to send you this message.) I am also cc'ing Council members so that they will be aware of this experience in light of the current negotiations. Please advise what your office can do to help resolve my situation. Thank you.

Regards,

Tom Goldstein

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