

Towns Oppose Verizon Bid To Hasten Hearing; Cable-Tv Licenses On The Table

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Cities and towns across the western suburbs are banding together to oppose an effort by Verizon to force them to act more quickly on cable-television license applications.

Cable franchise negotiations typically take a year or more. Verizon Communications Inc., which is building a fiber-optic network capable of carrying video signals to homes throughout the region, has asked the state Department of Telecommunications and Energy to amend cable regulations to limit the licensing process to 90 days.

Officials from Ashland, Holliston, Sherborn, Shrewsbury, and Wrentham recently sent letters to the agency strongly opposing the proposed change, and suggesting that Verizon was trying to rush deliberations and thus put the towns at a disadvantage. In comments to the state agency filed by lawyers representing Natick, Needham, Newton, Northborough and Sudbury, the towns called Verizon's proposal "unnecessary, unfair, extreme and against the public interest."

"Frankly, we don't understand the sudden rush for Verizon to circumvent all local control," said Shrewsbury Town Manager Daniel Morgado. "If every other cable provider has been able to operate using that system filing an application and then going through the public process why can't Verizon do that?"

Wrentham Town Administrator Steven Boudreau said Verizon's proposal "just doesn't give us enough time to consider a license brought before us and make a good, informed decision that's in the best interest of the town."

Verizon, a giant in the telecommunications industry, has spent the last three years stringing miles of fiber-optic cables in neighbor hoods throughout the region and beyond. In addition to telephone service and high-

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cable franchises in those towns as well, a spokesman said.

Zukowski chalks up the opposition to the company's proposal to bureaucratic inertia.

"Sometimes it's difficult to change," he said, adding, "Everybody wants choice for consumers. It's just a matter of how we get there."

Geoffrey Beckwith, executive director of the Massachusetts Municipal Association, said Verizon is trying to get around standard city and town requirements that cable companies serve the entire community or not at all.

"That's a major issue. We'll find lower-income, working-class neighborhoods will be left behind," Beckwith said.

Verizon maintains that it simply wants to reform and streamline regulations that were written 30 years ago, when cable companies were monopolies. Zukowski said it is not fair to require his company to wait a year or more just to send video signals along the network that already carries voice and data to area homes.

But cities and town maintain they are entitled to set the terms they see fit for cable carriers whose lines are strung through taxpayer-owned streets and sidewalks.

"This is public property that they're using," Beckwith said. "They need to meet some basic minimum standards."

Beckwith noted the irony that state regulators likely will require six months or more to sift through the Verizon proposal and make a decision.

"They're not going to do it in 90 days."

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