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PSC SEEKS COMMENTS ON PROPOSED LONG-DISTANCE COMPETITION RULES

The state Public Service Commission is seeking comments by December 16 on its proposed rules to implement a new element of telephone long-distance competition in Montana called intraLATA equal access. A hearing on the proposed rules is set for Thursday, December 18, at 9 a.m., in the PSC's Bollinger Room, 1701 Prospect Avenue, Helena.

LATAs (local access and transport areas) were created after the breakup of AT&T in the 1980s to mark the boundaries within which the former Bell companies like U S West Communications could transport long-distance calls. Montana was divided into two LATAs -- an east LATA and west LATA.

Currently long-distance calls placed by dialing "1" plus the area code and telephone number that originate and terminate in the same LATA are carried by U S West Communications. If a person wants to use another carrier for such an intraLATA long-distance call, he or she must first dial the several extra digits that make up the preferred carrier's access code. Except for the customers of Citizens Communications in Libby, Troy and Eureka, Montanans are not able to preselect the intraLATA long-distance carrier of their choice.

The federal Telecommunications Act of 1996 requires local telephone companies to provide customers with access to the carrier of the customer's choice on an equal dialing or "1-plus" basis, without having to dial an access code. The result of the law will be that, just as customers already choose a carrier for their other long-distance calls, they will eventually be able to select an intraLATA carrier and not have to dial extra digits to access that carrier.

Once intraLATA equal access is available, customers may choose the same long-distance carrier for both their intraLATA and other long-distance calls, or may select two different carriers. Under the proposed rules, even when intraLATA equal access is implemented by a local phone company, most Montanans' intraLATA calls will continue to be carried by U S West unless the customer selects a different intraLATA carrier.

The PSC's proposed rules set the guidelines for intraLATA equal access in Montana. Key provisions of the rules are:

- As required by federal law, U S West must implement intraLATA equal access for its customers by February 8, 1999, or when the company starts providing statewide (interLATA) long-distance service, whichever is sooner.
- Local telephone companies other than U S West must implement intraLATA equal access for their customers either on their own initiative or within six months of receipt of a written request from a carrier. Local phone companies may ask the

PSC to waive these requirements if the written request is not bona fide, or if implementation is economically burdensome or technically infeasible or not in the public interest.

- A local phone company may require a carrier requesting intraLATA equal access to establish a performance bond that would be subject to forfeit if the carrier fails to provide intraLATA long-distance services within six months of the local phone company's implementation.
- The local phone company must send written information to its customers describing intraLATA equal access and explaining the intraLATA carrier selection process at least 30 days before implementation.

Written comments on the proposed intraLATA equal access rules must be received by the PSC no later than December 16. Send comments to Karen Hammel, PSC, PO Box 202601, Helena 59620-2601.

Until intraLATA equal access is available, Montanans should be aware that they can use the intraLATA long-distance carrier of their choice if it's a carrier other than U S West, but they must dial that carrier's access code prior to placing calls.

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