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Qwest Rates Going Down; DSL Expansion Schedule Released

Thanks to the work of the Public Service Commission (PSC), Montana Consumer Counsel, and a concerned group of Qwest customers, all 260,000 Montana Qwest customers will soon be paying less for their phone service. The rate relief begins May 1 and will result in more than \$1.3 million staying in Montanan's pockets each month. In addition, the schedule for the first year of a required three year \$20 million digital subscriber lines (DSL) expansion has been released.

After five years of legal wrangling, including a Montana Supreme Court Case, the PSC approved a five year agreement* with the company late last year, which requires rate reductions of \$16 million annually and the Qwest expansion of high-speed Internet service to 27 Montana communities currently without DSL. Individual customer bill reductions will vary due to the current Qwest patchwork of charges and rates.

A monthly decrease of \$4.72 is in store for 85% of residential customers with basic service. In some instances, the reduction could be as large as \$10.47 a month, and no residential customer with basic service will receive less than a \$2.00 a month reduction. Most Qwest business customers will see a monthly reduction of \$6.66; the largest business reductions being \$12.41 a month, with no business customer saving less than \$3.94 a month.

A recently released 12-month timeline indicates when some Montana communities can anticipate the availability of DSL service. Boulder, Bridger, Canyon Ferry, Clancy, Darby, Forsyth, Park City, and Roberts should have DSL by September 2009. Fromberg, Joliet, Warm Springs, and Wolf Creek are on tap to receive DSL by December 2009. Opportunity, Townsend, Ulm, and Victor are slated for DSL by May 2010.

Details regarding the schedule for the remaining communities in the agreement are not yet available but all DSL work for these areas, which include Amsterdam, Cascade, Clyde Park, Cooke City, Dutton, East Glacier Park, Gardiner, Pray, Saint Mary, West Glacier, and Wilsall, must be completed by May 2012. More details on the agreement can be found on the PSC site, www.psc.mt.gov, under Docket D2008.1.6.

Made up of 5 elected commissioners, the PSC works to ensure that Montanans receive safe and reliable service from regulated public utilities while paying reasonable rates. Utilities regulated by the PSC generally include private investor-owned natural gas, electric, telephone, water, and sewer companies. In addition, the PSC regulates certain motor carriers, and oversees natural gas pipeline safety and intrastate railroad safety.

**Commissioner Toole did not vote on the agreement because he had filed a formal complaint against Qwest which was settled as part of the case. Commissioners Jergeson, Molnar, Mood, and Raney all voted in favor of the agreement.*