

## Duluth says steam break not to blame for phone outage

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Jerry Pelofske, manager of the Duluth Steam Cooperative Association that runs the coal plant and steam lines for the city of Duluth, said no such break occurred.

By: [Mike Creger](#), Lake County News Chronicle

Qwest Communications' explanation that a steam pipe rupture caused a fiber-optic line break that knocked out North Shore phone and Internet service this week doesn't hold water, the manager of the plant that tends the pipes said today.

Internet and phone communication, including cell service, was down for about 12 hours along much of the North Shore on Tuesday after a break in a Qwest line under Second Street in downtown Duluth. Crews repairing the line also knocked out service in parts of Duluth. At the time, Qwest explained that a steam pipe rupture had melted the line.

But Jerry Pelofske, manager of the Duluth Steam Cooperative Association that runs the coal plant and steam lines for the city of Duluth, said no such incident occurred. He said a Duluth Steam worker received a call from Qwest at 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, about four hours after the outage began. Qwest wanted some markings done on where steam pipes were located, Pelofske said, reading from a work detail report.

Qwest spokeswoman Joanna Hjelmeland, who originally gave reporters the pipe rupture explanation, did not offer any new details when told of Pelofske's contention.

"We are working on an investigation to confirm the exact cause of the external damage to our facilities," Hjelmeland she said. "Until our investigation is complete, I'm not able to discuss more details."

The steam plant serves more than 200 Duluth businesses downtown and in Canal Park with 10 miles of high-pressure lines. Had a pipe ruptured, it would have been pretty visible, Pelofske said. "You'd see a big cloud of steam." The pressure in lines is at 150 pounds per square inch and the water in them is at 365 degrees. Pelofske said Duluth Steam warned Qwest about five years ago about its practice of laying phone lines across or along steam pipes without proper insulation.

Duluth's public works department had no part in the outage response, said city public information coordinator Pakou Ly. She directed questions to Duluth Steam.

The outage forced emergency response teams in Lake and Cook counties to find a way to re-route 911 calls and keep communication among fire, rescue and police personnel. There was one fire during the 12-hour outage — at Reliable Auto in Two Harbors, just after 8 p.m. It was handled in regular fashion, with adequate radio contact and a patched-up 911 service in place, Lake County Sheriff Carey Johnson said.

There were no other major emergencies in the service cut-off that lasted from just before 11 a.m. to around midnight Tuesday.

### ONE BREAK BROUGHT SYSTEM DOWN

Still, some have questioned why there wasn't a backup line available. Lake County Commissioner Paul Bergman, in a letter to U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar Thursday, cited the outage's affect on businesses, many of which were limited to cash-only transactions, and stressed more critical effects.

"Because our phone service providers do not provide redundant loops, one break is all it took to threaten citizens' access to emergency responses from ambulances, emergency response teams, fire protection and law enforcement," he wrote.

"One of the bigger elephants in the room we have not said out loud is, because we are border counties with Canada, a possible threat to our national security caused by a broken phone line and no redundant way to reroute."

Sheriff Johnson said when Lake County was considering using Qwest for its communications, including the 911 system, it was assured there would be a backup line. After two previous line breaks and no available backup, the county had to create the internal emergency plan that was used Tuesday.

"We talked about outages," he said of discussions with Qwest. "They said it would get re-routed."

Lake, St. Louis, and Cook counties are awaiting federal money to begin broadband projects that would have redundant lines.

"This emergency revealed a glaring weakness to our 911 service and we need you to act now so the counties can begin construction of this enhanced fiber network," Bergman wrote in the letter to Oberstar.