

Qwest files for damages in fiber optic line break

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Qwest Communications has served notices to the city and its steam plant of its intent to collect damages for the Jan. 26 fiber optic line break at West Second Street and Second Avenue in Duluth.

Don Douglas, the claims investigator for the city of Duluth, said he received a letter from a collection agency "putting us on notice" for damages caused when a "steam pipe began leaking" and severed fiber optic lines. Douglas responded, telling the collection company that the city had no involvement and the warning should go to Duluth Steam Cooperative.

Duluth Steam manager Jerry Pelofske said he got the claim, filed it with the cooperative's insurance company, and put it in a drawer. He doesn't expect anything to come of it. He said the third parties have been in contact with each other.

"We get one every five or six years when something happens to their lines," he said. He said the cooperative has never had to pay claims because the fault is in the installation of unprotected fiber lines too near the heat of the steam pipes.

There was no dollar figure requested in the notice.

Qwest spokeswoman Joanna Hjelmeland called it a "routine claim process when a third party damages Qwest facilities." She said an actual claim hasn't been filed yet. "This first step in the process notifies the parties that we've conducted our internal and external investigations and are preparing a claim." She expects Qwest will file the actual claim in a few weeks.

The "notice of claim," dated Feb. 18, states that Qwest lines "sustained damage as a result of the negligent acts or omissions by employees or agents of Duluth Steam."

Pelofske said his workers have checked the area where Qwest says damage was done but, as he has said repeatedly the past month, there was no leak or rupture in any steam pipes. The letter from the collection agency is the only communication he said he's received about the fiber optic line damage the past month.

The fiber optic line break happened just before 11 a.m. Jan. 26 and service wasn't fully restored until around midnight. It affected customers from Two Harbors to Grand Portage who were left without internet, phone or cell coverage. Hjelmeland said the actual time to repair the line wasn't out of the ordinary. "What's unusual is what caused it."

Qwest's Minnesota president, John Stanoch, is expected to send a letter explaining the findings of the line break investigation to Lake County officials next week, Hjelmeland said. "Our plan is following the filing to meet with commissioners and elected officials sometime by the end of March."

On Feb. 5, Stanoch reported in a letter to state and Lake County officials that there were signs that heat under a Duluth street ruined its fiber optics line. The statement said that when employees zeroed in on the problem in January, workers found a line "deformed due to what appeared to our crew to be heat damage."

Stanoch said the line had been in place since 1987. When crews responded to the outage, "steam was escaping from two manholes." He said air temperature in the manhole was "significantly warmer than normal."

All of that was news to Pelofske. "I haven't seen or heard anything," he said at the time. "No, we did not have a steam line break. We did not have a leak."

Stanoch later met with Lake and Cook county board members and Lake County Sheriff Carey Johnson to discuss the break and back-up measures for the line up the North Shore. He said that technically, there was a backup line but it was damaged with the main line. He said installation standards in 1987 were different than now.

Public safety officials scrambled to find alternative ways to communicate, including two-way and ham radios. Business owners complained about lost business in letters to commissioners in Lake and Cook counties and residents brought up fears of not getting help in case of a medical emergency. There were even concerns raised about national security considering Cook County is adjacent to the international border with Canada. Qwest officials had said they wouldn't comment on what actually happened until they complete the investigation. "People say things on all different sides, and we have to be careful," Hjelmeland said in February. "This is something that could come down to legal issues."