

Reason for outage remains a mystery

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An outage of information remains more than a week after a fiber optic line break in Duluth cut the entire North Shore from cell, phone and internet service last Tuesday. Qwest is saying nothing about the break and its aftermath since the News-Chronicle discovered last week that the reason it stated for the outage, that a steam pipe burst under the streets of Duluth and melted its line, was refuted by the company that minds the pipes.

Aside from keeping the cause of the break from the public, Qwest isn't answering questions about the lack of a redundant line up the Shore to prevent such outages. That has raised the ire of leaders in Lake and Cook counties as they gather a growing stream of angry residents and business owners wanting answers.

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

According to Jerry Pelofske, manager of the Duluth Steam Cooperative Association, which runs a coal plant and lines for the city of Duluth, no such incident occurred. He said a Duluth Steam worker received a call from Qwest at 2:30 p.m. that 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. He said this week that he hasn't heard from Qwest since.

Pelofske said Duluth Steam warned Qwest about five years ago about its practice of laying phone lines across or along steam pipes without adequate insulation. Pelofske said Qwest was reminded again last week on how to properly insulate its lines.

Qwest spokesperson Joanna Hjelmeland, who originally reported the steam pipe rupture, was made aware of Duluth Steam's contention but offered no more details. "We are working on an investigation to confirm the exact cause of the external damage to our facilities," Hjelmeland wrote in an email response. "Until our investigation is complete, I'm not able to discuss more details."

She said the line break is not criminal in nature, only stating "We have industry experts and manufacturers accessing the damage."

Everyone in the dark

It seems anyone you talk to about the line break is surprised about Qwest's original explanation and lack of any more information. Frontier Communications, with its own lines in the county dead last week because they are tied to Qwest lines, was "waiting for a call" from Qwest for more details. Frontier's northern Minnesota general manager, Kirk Lehman, called the situation "unbelievable" considering his company was working side by side with Qwest to solve the problems last week.

"That's not the information fed to me," Lehman said of the lack of credibility to the steam pipe explanation. "I would like to know what happened."

He said it was his understanding that at least 3,000 feet of fiber needed to be replaced under Second Street. He said Frontier wants to focus on customers and it's important to tell them "what's the problem."

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 psi and the water in them is at 365 degrees.

Duluth's public works department had no part in the outage response, director Jim Benning said.

Scrambling for 911

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 were no major emergencies in an outage that lasted from just before 11 a.m. to around midnight Tuesday. There was a major business fire in Two Harbors just after 8 p.m. but fire and rescue crews had adequate radio communication and a patched-up 911 service was working, Lake County Sheriff Carey Johnson said.

Campaign for answers

Lake County Commissioner Paul Bergman, in a letter to U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar Thursday, echoed the concerns of representatives in Lake and Cook counties. Bergman cited the outage's affect on businesses, many of which were limited to cash-only transactions, but stressed the most critical element of the outage. "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."

"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," Bergman wrote.

Bergman emailed John Stanoch, Qwest's Minnesota president, and the response Friday morning was much like the line heard since the steam pipe explanation was disputed, though Stanoch distanced Qwest from any problems. "It is clear that the failure was not due to any action by Qwest," Stanoch wrote. "It would be inaccurate and unfair to blame this situation on Qwest."

Bergman also got a response from Oberstar's office this week. Communications Director John Shadl said he had spent a "good deal of time talking to Qwest" Tuesday and it again said it was looking at an "external cause" for the line break with little other information.

Shadl said the Qwest representative began to make an argument against local government getting into broadband as Lake County is. "I told him that this incident did seem to be a good example of why a redundant system is needed in a rural area," Shadl wrote to Bergman.

Sheriff Johnson said when the county was considering using Qwest for its communications, including the 911 system, it was assured there would be a backup line. After two line breaks in the past 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."

Johnson said it's a question of infrastructure and the different companies that share lines as they snake their way up the shore. County officials are continuing talks with Qwest about options during line breaks, Johnson said, and one of the questions will be why there remains just one line going up the entire North Shore.

Two-county problem

Bergman said he has commiserated with Cook County Commissioner Bob Fenwick, who had a lot to say about the powerless feeling along the shore. In an interview with Grand Marais radio station WTIP, he said "we will be having many more conversations on this as the days go on, in terms of how do we make sure these kinds of things don't happen. Someone could have had a medical problem in a (remote) part of the county. We know the consequences of that."

Lake, St. Louis, and Cook counties are awaiting federal money to begin broadband projects which would have redundant lines. "This emergency revealed a glaring weakness to our (emergency) 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.

"We've said over and over again, if the line gets cut into Cook County we're out of business," Fenwick told WTIP. "Until it happens you don't feel the effects. It happened."

"There's that old saying," Bergman said this week. "You don't want to waste a good emergency."

Emergency response

One of the letters of reaction to the outage last week collected by Commissioner Paul Bergman was from BJ Kohlstedt, Lake County's emergency management coordinator. She wrote:

"This letter is to reiterate support for the Lake County broadband initiative in light of the recent fiber optic communications failure on the North Shore. We've come to rely upon phone, internet and wireless communications for daily business and personal use to the point of taking them for granted. An incident like the Tuesday fiber optic failure, which eliminated most of those communications from Duluth to Canada for just a single day, crippled business, threatened safety and security, and highlighted our vulnerability to failures of those communications systems.

"In emergency management, communications are critical and consistently provide the greatest challenges. In this case, Lake County's Public Safety Answering Point (911 call receipt and dispatch center) was critically impacted. Volunteer fire and medical responders stood by at their halls during the day to respond to local phone calls, radio requests or drive up emergencies until 911 calls could be rerouted. Cook County programmed the Lake County frequency into their alternate dispatch console providing direct communication to address public safety and border security vulnerabilities. Our public warning and information system was affected because the NOAA weather radio tower in Finland could not broadcast. Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Services volunteers were activated, and remained on the air well into the next morning to deliver messages between Cook, Lake and St. Louis counties, and the State Emergency Operations Center in St. Paul.

"The cost of this short episode, both in monetary and personal terms, was tremendous. It also pointed out that a looped fiber optic system in Lake County would have eliminated the effects of the outage almost immediately and entirely."