

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS  
FOR SOMERSET COUNTY  
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2013

SPECIAL SESSION

At 1:00 P.M., The Board of County Commissioners for Somerset County met in special session with Commissioner Vice-President Charles F. Fisher, Commissioner Jerry S. Boston and Commissioner Randy Laird.

Also present was Ralph D. Taylor, County Administrator-Clerk; Cynthia R. Ward, Executive Aide; and the following representatives from Charter Communications: Jim Corrin, Director of Government Relations; and Brian Gregory, Senior Director of Government Relations.

Commissioner Fisher welcomed the Charter Officials and members of the public that were in attendance.

Mr. Taylor, County Administrator, stated the purpose of today's meeting - to discuss issues that the Board has deemed of concern. Over the last few years, we have received a plethora of complaints. Constituents have complained of inadequate internet speeds, countless television signal interruptions to include audio and video, lack of High Definition TV and even unsatisfactory customer service, just to name a few. Mr. Taylor thanked Charter for their willingness to engage in a discussion with the Board today. Hopefully, this conversation will show Charter the seriousness of the issues and will garner a commitment from them on a solution to provide better services in the very near future.

Mr. Gregory began by stating that although he is new to Charter, he has worked in the industry for fourteen years. Also new to the company, is the CEO (Thomas Rutledge) and the General Manager Vice-President. New practices and procedures have been put in place and appear to be helping on the technical side. They also have increased their focus on customer service. Mr. Gregory is very encouraged by the direction of the company now, although they are continuing to improve. They are aware of complaints, particularly concerning the internet speed and service dropping off. In an attempt to address this problem, they have recently doubled the capacity of the internet link which has helped the speed and reliability. According to Mr. Gregory, they are getting positive feedback from customers since making this change. The cable system is a modern upgraded system similar to those in other areas; and is well maintained by the local office. The biggest challenge they face in providing service is the lack of a contiguous

connection to other charter systems, and no fiber connectivity. Therefore they are using a microwave radio link to obtain service. This, however, can be affected by weather conditions. Improvements that were made for the internet service, unfortunately, do not affect the ability to receive high definition or other video services. The geography and lack of fiber link connection still restrict them from providing these services. They are, however, moving forward with new leadership, processes and procedures.

Commissioner Fisher asked the following question:

“Can you explain why there are so many disruptions in cable service (audio and video) over the last few years? What are your plans to fix the situation?”

Mr. Gregory reiterated that the system is modern and well maintained, however, some drops going into houses are old and in poor condition and in need of replacement. Their technicians are checking the signal levels when responding to complaints and making those replacements when necessary. This will help to decrease the number of intermittent outages, but does not address widespread outages. Based upon the majority of complaints, Commissioner Laird advised that most of the outages were widespread and were head end issues, not problems with individual houses. For the last 3-4 weeks, he has not observed any channel outages, but prior to this time, there were numerous outages on a regular basis over a one year period. Commissioner Laird stated that he has reported the problems in the past via email, but was not always successful in seeing results. Mr. Gregory recommended the customer service number always be used to report problems for tracking purposes. Commissioner Laird advised that he has not had a good experience with this procedure in the past. Mr. Laird also spoke on customer service problems at the local office when dealing with service related issues. Mr. Gregory stated that the local office should be able to assist a complainant.

Commissioner Laird asked the following question:

“Why is High Definition TV not been offered to your users in Somerset County? When will you bring High Definition to Somerset County?”

In order to get high definition, there needs to be fiber connectivity to a headend at another charter served area.

Commissioner Boston asked the following question:

“Does Charter know about the fiber cable which is now in Somerset County? If so, are there any plans to Join Maryland Broadband co-op and provide a more reliable faster internet service to your users?”

Mr. Gregory was not personally familiar with Maryland Broadband Co-op, but is willing to explore this with their company representative.

Commissioner Boston also inquired if Charter has any plans to update aging infrastructure within the system.

According to Mr. Gregory, the infrastructure is in good shape and is well maintained, but individual drops in houses are in need of replacement, which they are addressing. Federal testing procedures which measure signal strength or determine possible leaks are performed biannually. Any issues that are raised are addressed immediately.

Commissioner Fisher asked the following questions:

“Another provider offers a program called internet essentials. The program allows for reduced internet fees for a household that has a child enrolled in a local school whom participates in the national school lunch program. Does Charter offer a similar program? Would Charter be interested in initiating such a program in our county?”

In response, Mr. Gregory advised that Charter does not offer this program. A similar pilot program exists in another area, but he is not aware of any in this area.

Mr. Taylor stressed the importance of having this type of program in our area due to impoverished communities that are in need of such services.

Commissioner Laird inquired about Charter’s plans to improve customer service at the local Crisfield Office and better customer service overall. He also cited a particular complaint involving a service disconnect that occurred at the wrong address. Mr. Corrin obtained the customers information that lodged the complaint.

Commissioner Fisher also questioned if there was a technician for the Crisfield area. The Board was advised that a technician is not “assigned” to Crisfield. According to their policy, the technicians are dispatched based upon the workload and the required classification that is needed to perform a particular task. A Supervisor will also monitor the work of the technicians. They are often dispatched and respond directly from their residence. Certain services are now performed via telephone or internet, such as bill paying, technical fix, etc.

Commissioner Laird also inquired if Charter has a policy on time response to a particular outage. During his employment with Charter, they were required to respond within 12 hours. Mr. Gregory stated that it was beneficial to the company to respond to the complaint as soon as possible.

At this time, Commissioner Laird read a quote from the CEO of Charter, Thomas Rutledge, regarding their emphasis on "service". Commissioner Laird responded to this quote by stating that "They have dropped the ball in Crisfield..... a stack of complaints; outages; internet service bad for the past year.....they did not live up to the CEO expectations, per his statement."

Mr. Gregory advised that Mr. Rutledge is in the process of improving these processes and addressing customer service. He has acknowledged these problems and is attempting to make improvements. Job #1 is to serve the customer.

Mayor Percy Purnell (The City of Crisfield) began by stating "the microwave system is not cutting it" and service is barely getting by. The fiber is available and he has spoken with Charter Officials and "they know it is available". Mayor Purnell stated that Charter will never fix the problems until they get rid of the microwave system. They are capable of doing better, and if Comcast was available, Charter would have been gone five years ago. The Mayor reported that thirty percent of his time is spent on the telephone taking complaints from citizens regarding Charter service. He went on to say, "the fiber is here, Charter simply needs to tie into it." If they are not going to connect to the fiber, then he recommended they submit a letter stating they are terminating the service, and let us get Comcast or some other company to take over the service. It was Mayor Purnell's opinion that nothing is being accomplished in these meetings, and service will always be marginal with a microwave system due to the unreliable feeds. "Make the investment, or let someone else take it over."

Mr. Terry Pehan, a Charter customer since 2003 and President of the Annemessex Ridge Home Owners Association (83 homes) addressed the Board and Charter Officials. He advised that some of the residents were former Charter customers but they have now gone to satellite feeds for the reasons we have talked about today. Mr. Pehan went on to state that high speed internet used to be a convenience, but is now a standard. Small businesses rely on it. Many businesses operate out of their homes and they demand a constant high speed internet service. It is an inconvenience to the casual user like himself; but a necessity to a business owner. It's a

direct economic impact for the County to attract businesses and people who are in business, as well as tourists linked to their business while away from home. Additionally, Mr. Pehan inquired about the lack of DVR service? He has been told that we do not qualify. Lastly, on Charter's informational (community) channel, the contrast makes it very difficult to read messages. He also advised of a neighbor whom subscribes to Netflix, however, the speed was so slow he could not utilize it. In summary, he pointed out that high speed internet service and quality video service is an absolute necessity for economic development. The County is working hard to improve economic development and rebuild Crisfield, post Hurricane Sandy and he encouraged Charter to pursue whatever means are necessary to improve their services. In conclusion, he commended a Charter Technician (Carlos) and asked that Charter give him the support he needs to provide the customers with the service they deserve.

Mr. Dan Kuebler, a Crisfield resident, began by stating "the microwave system is fragile, we need a robust system that is self-repairing/recovering." Many residents have high definition televisions but cannot receive high definition service. Internet service ranges from 5mg. or less, a third of the speed that is generally considered to be high speed. Residents located just one mile off of Rt. 413 have no cable service available to them. Additionally, our students have no way to connect with the school to obtain homework assignments or perform research on the internet. This greatly affects student achievement. The lack of "information highway" affects our growth, both residential and commercial. Mr. Kuebler reported on the work that was performed to get fiber installed along Rt. 413 and routed to our schools, libraries, and emergency services. It is operational on the public side, but the commercial side is not being utilized. Charter officials have been advised that the fiber is available. Mr. Kuebler also spoke on the numerous complaints that are called into tech. support, which results in a service call by a technician that cannot resolve the problem, because the issue is a head end problem. Mr. Kuebler stated that the local Charter Office is probably costly to operate and is only capable of receiving payments. In conclusion, we live 150 miles from the capital of the most powerful nation on earth, and we receive television and internet service with the quality that is expected of a Third World Country. Mr. Gregory asked Mr. Kuebler if he has seen any improvement recently since increasing the capacity. Mr. Kuebler reiterated that his internet speed is one-third the speed of what is considered high speed; it is very fragile; it is off and on; and echoed the remarks of the Mayor, that we need the fiber connection.

Mayor Purnell stated that he is operating with DSL and that he cannot operate City Hall with an unreliable system, as earlier described.

Mr. Phil Riggin, of Crisfield, agreed with the remarks that have already been made by Mr. Pehan and Mr. Kuebler. He also spoke on a meeting that he attended last night regarding an economic development plan for the recovery efforts for the City of Crisfield. There are two principal points that are critical to the plan, and one of them is reliable high speed internet for economic development. Without it, the City cannot move forward in the right direction.

Mr. Danny Thompson, Director of Economic Development for Somerset County, echoed the earlier statement of our proximity to Washington DC. We are a rural area, but we still need the technology to do business. According to Mr. Thompson, small businesses in the area have grown via internet sales and they depend on the availability of internet service. On a larger scale, McCready Hospital, our local healthcare provider, has a new CEO that was totally surprised by the lack of high speed internet service. Also, remote work stations, particularly on the federal side, have become very popular in which employees can work from home. This is not always possible in our area, due to the lack of service. Mr. Thompson stated that our current system is not only hampering our growth, it's also hurting the marketing efforts of our businesses. He concluded by inquiring if Charter has communicated with Maryland Broadband Co-op recently, or within the last year?

Mr. Gregory stated that he has not personally been in contact with them, but maybe someone from another department has. He seemed to recall that "they have talked with them." He is willing, however, to meet with them.

Mrs. Carolyn Marquis, owner of a "bed and breakfast" in Crisfield, suggested Charter Officials work on the "next step" and determine what their plan is for the next ninety days; and what areas are they going to target, such as customer relations. She expressed her frustration that customer service has shown no improvement. She concluded by stating that her business cannot afford to spend the time to get Charter to do their job.

Mr. Donnie Drewer, of Salisbury, noted that he has a second home in Crisfield and recalled the early years of cable in Crisfield. Little has changed since cable was first installed, except for the need to have a box for the additional channels. He compared the services he receives from Comcast in Salisbury (800 channels, High Definition, high speed internet service, DVR) to that of Charter (60 channels, no High Definition, no high speed internet, and no DVR),

while paying similar costs for both. He also estimates that 50% of Crisfield residents have left Charter's service to go to Directv. From a business standpoint, this is not the way they should be operating. Mr. Drewer suggested the County Commissioners put a timeline on when these problems will be addressed.

Commissioner Fisher called for any other comments or questions.


Mr. Gregory stated that he will be happy to meet with anyone after the meeting, and also work with the County, possibly through a designated representative. Commissioner Fisher suggested the County Administrator; Commissioner Laird; and Mayor Purnell. He also suggested Mr. Gregory meet with Broadband Officials that are present today before leaving.

A Broadband Representative spoke briefly. He advised that Maryland Broadband has been engaged in conversations with Charter for the last six months, and he will be happy to meet with them after today's meeting.

Commissioner Laird concluded the meeting by reminding everyone that the cable franchise terminates in 2015 and the Commissioners need to have these issues addressed before then. Also, he referenced a similar scenario that took place on Tangier Island several years ago in which Charter slowly scaled back their service, and then terminated all service to the Tangier Island customers. Commissioner Laird asked that they not take the same action in Crisfield.

Commissioner Fisher adjourned the meeting at 2:08 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted:

  
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Cynthia R. Ward  
Executive Aide

Approved By:

  
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Board of County Commissioners  
For Somerset County