

LAWSUIT FILED IN TWIN CITIES LOW-COST INTERNET DISPUTE, PIONEER PRESS

By Julio Ojeda-Zapata

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About 14,000 Twin Cities low-income households at risk of losing their low-cost Internet service next month got no closer to relief this week, as a long-running disagreement among the service's tech providers got more complicated.

Mobile Beacon and Mobile Citizen, two national nonprofits focused on offering affordable Internet to the poor, on Wednesday sued wireless carrier Sprint because of what they claim have been months of unproductive negotiations as a Nov. 6 deadline looms.

The low-cost service would tap into Sprint's data network, but the nonprofits' have accused the carrier of imposing unreasonable terms. Sprint denies this, saying it has negotiated in good faith, and stressing its interest in seeing the disadvantaged get online.

The 14,000 local households get their Internet access from a St. Paul nonprofit called PCs for People, which in turn purchases the service from Mobile Beacon and Mobile Citizen. PCs for People is among 1,820 nonprofits, 429 schools and 61 public libraries that either use or resell the Internet service. An estimated 300,000 people nationwide are affected.

The White Bear Lake school district is one educational user of the Internet access, according to Mobile Citizen.

PCs for People said it has been fielding hundreds of calls per day from confused consumers who are wondering what will happen to their low-cost Internet.

The nonprofit doesn't have a good answer for them, said director Casey Sorensen, who has watched powerlessly and with growing frustration as Sprint has bickered with Mobile Beacon and Mobile Citizen.

"Kids and families ultimately lose out because two parties can't sit down and have productive discussions," Sorensen said. "Litigation won't help the kids and families. It will just prolong the dispute."

The Internet service is set to go dark after Nov. 6 as Sprint closes down a wireless-data network that uses outdated technology. The Internet service would migrate to Sprint's modern wireless-data network, but this has been held up as the parties have squabbled.

In their lawsuit, filed in Massachusetts, Mobile Beacon and Mobile Citizen accuse Sprint of providing inadequate bandwidth for the service and of dragging its feet in providing up-to-date hardware for the service's users.

"There are a multitude of issues, but those two stand out," said Cassie Bair, managing director of Colorado-based Mobile Citizen.

One deal breaker in talks with Sprint, said Bair, is data throttling that gives Internet users high-speed Internet access only up to 6 gigabytes of data, after which the connection drops to what she is calling near-worthless speeds.

Bair said she knows this because the service has been in testing with a small number of U.S. schools it serves. When a student at such a school reaches the 6-gig limit, the access becomes akin to a dial-up connection, she claims.

"Ours is one of the few programs available that not only serves students, but also low-income adults, seniors and the disabled," said Katherine Messier, managing director of Rhode Island-based Mobile Beacon, in a statement. "We don't believe providing a second-class Internet service or 'slow lane' is an acceptable means to close the digital divide."

Adequate, reliable access to the necessary Internet hardware has been another major problem, said Bair, noting her organization's difficulty in keeping even the tiny number of test schools properly equipped.

Sprint said Thursday the lawsuit is an unproductive, unfortunate development.

"We're disappointed, obviously, because we've been attempting to pursue a resolution for the last several months," said Patty Tikkala, Sprint's vice president of spectrum. "It is frustrating that this is getting to litigation because there are so many other paths we would have preferred."

The carrier acknowledged that throttling exists, but said this can be managed so users aren't inordinately inconvenienced. What's more, Tikkala said, Sprint has given Mobile Beacon and Mobile Citizen a number of proposals for getting this problem resolved.

The plaintiffs "are not describing the current offer," said Tikkala, who declined to specify the nature of that offer. "We have tried to address ways they can balance their loads and use their capacity bucket, but we have not received any responses back other than litigation."

As for gear shortages, Tikkala said the plaintiffs have not been cooperative in properly detailing their hardware requirements.

"We have repeatedly asked for forecasts of which devices they want so we can try to keep them in stock," she said. "We're somewhat shooting in the dark."