

NONPROFITS FIGHT SPRINT WIMAX NETWORK SHUTDOWN, RCR WIRELESS

By Jeff Hawn

October 21, 2015

Read More: <http://www.rcrwireless.com/20151021/carriers/sprint-wimax-shutdown-draws-nonprofit-ire-tag15>

In 2010, in partnership with its subsidiary CLEAR and the nonprofit organizations Mobile Citizen and Mobile Beacon, Sprint began providing affordable broadband service to 429 schools, 61 libraries and 1,820 nonprofit organizations. All told, this initiative provided Internet access to some 300,000 Americans.

With Sprint announcing its intent to shutdown the legacy system, 40 nonprofit organizations have sent a letter to Sprint CEO Marcelo Claure emphasizing the importance of the WiMAX service.

The letter, which was also copied to all the Federal Communications Commission members says, "Since 2010, Mobile Citizen and Mobile Beacon have offered affordable Internet access to schools, libraries and nonprofits in need via a partnership with CLEAR, now Sprint. This partnership has helped more than 300,000 Americans – children in schools serving our country's most vulnerable youth, moms who count pennies for groceries, seniors struggling to get access to essential healthcare information. Sprint's plan to shut down this network will leave these Americans in the dark"

Sprint plans to upgrade its entire network to LTE. CLEAR, which Sprint acquired, used the older WiMAX system, which has now largely become defunct. The network shutdown could potentially lead to data limits being imposed on those using Mobile Citizen and Mobile Beacon system.

Sprint maintains, "This is a contract dispute. Simply put, the reality of this situation is that Sprint is bringing more advanced, higher quality broadband service to market, not turn it off," Sprint spokesperson Stephanie Walsh said.

Sprint Corporate Communications said, "Sprint has gone to great lengths to work with all WiMAX users to transition WiMAX accounts to LTE, for the express purpose of improving the consumer broadband experience, not shutting it off. And we have been very successful at transitioning the majority of these accounts. But the transition cannot take place without the cooperation of each licensee."

Todd O'Boyle, media and democracy program director at Common Cause, said "Our goal, in sending this letter is to make sure none of the organization's that use this program are left worse off than before."

Data caps and the possibility of increased rates could be characterized as being worse off. Other co-signers of the letter are less generous with their view of Sprint's actions.

Holmes Wilson, co-director for Fight for the Future, an Internet activist organization, said, "It's Kafkaesque. All these deserving groups continue to have accounts, but they're getting cut off on a technicality. Sprint can fix this: they just need to stop dragging their feet and do the right thing."

Walsh argued otherwise, "Sprint has worked very proactively and diligently to transition all affected partners and customers. Sprint gave notice to these licensees in the summer of 2014 regarding the November 2015 decommissioning date — well over a year ago. And we have continuously publicized

this date throughout 2015. In fact, we have already transitioned the vast majority of our other EBS licensee community to the new LTE network, and their users are already enjoying the benefits of the higher quality broadband service. Like the vast majority of our other EBS licensee partners, Mobile Beacon and Mobile Citizen could have transitioned their end users to the new and superior LTE network months ago.”