



The New Frugality
by Chris Farrell

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Commentary

North Shore communities discover a frightening vulnerability

February 4, 2010

By Jim Boyd

Grand Marais, Minn. - Along about midmorning on Tuesday, Jan. 26, the communications plug abruptly got pulled on Cook County in northeast Minnesota. Instantly, it became just about impossible to communicate with anyone outside the county, and many within. The same was true for Lake County. The two counties suffered this serious handicap well into Tuesday evening.

On Minnesota Public Radio, the event earned [a short story](#) about the lack of long distance telephone and 911 emergency services. From a Twin Cities perspective, that's what happened. From inside Cook County, the story is much more serious.

The culprit, according to Qwest's initial explanation, was a broken steam pipe somewhere under Duluth, which parboiled a Qwest fiber optic line -- THE fiber optic line that carries almost all communications between the North Shore and the rest of the world. It wasn't just long distance and 911, though those were bad enough. Cell phones were down, too, because (surprise to many) those signals don't bounce from tower to tower; they bounce to one tower and then go through regular telephone lines.

Internet connections also vanished, except for those with satellite Internet (the one and only time satellite customers felt glad of the fact).

The story grew curiuser and curiuser when the Duluth Steam Cooperative Association denied such an incident ever happened. An association spokesman told the Duluth News Tribune that no steam breaks occurred that day. He did say, however, that the association had warned Qwest about laying fiber cable over steam pipes without proper insulation. Qwest says it is investigating; state and federal officials may wish to do the same.

Whatever the cause, effects of this day-long loss of communications were broad and frightening in the possibilities they presented for disaster. Consider:

Fifty-eight seniors and other vulnerable adults across Cook County instantly lost use of their FirstCall emergency alert buttons. They rely on those buttons to summon help if they fall or become incapacitated.

At the border with Canada, customs agents were reduced to recording license plates with pen and paper. They had no ability to make a computer check on plates or passports. To communicate with the world, agents had to walk or drive to the Canadian port of entry and use the Canadian phones. Imagine, our vaunted Homeland Security apparatus thwarted by one broken fiber cable in Duluth.

County and state police officers lost the ability to check driver's licenses and vehicle plate numbers and to make warrant checks on people pulled over or behaving suspiciously. Cook County deputies could communicate with their Lake County counterparts via radio, but since Lake County was in the same situation, that didn't do much good.

Cook County has four telephone exchanges. Local land-line calls within an exchange continued to work for many people, but not all. In the absence of 911 service (which is routed through Duluth for some reason), volunteer fire folk were stationed at fire halls in each exchange. If someone called a fire hall with an emergency, the volunteer could then radio the information to the county law enforcement center, and a wider alert could be broadcast.

Cook County Sheriff Mark Falk exaggerated not a bit in his analysis: "The impact that this had on public safety could have been significant. If there would have been a critical incident it could have been catastrophic, compromising the safety of the public, first responders and law enforcement."

Sawtooth Clinic and the Cook County North Shore Hospital lost the ability to communicate via computer, even with each other. They had no access to online patient records and no ability to consult with specialists in Duluth or beyond, which is critical. Ham radio operators were

pressed into service to provide a makeshift link with Duluth. Other online medical services, such as prescription renewals, also were lost.

Post offices offered only services that could be completed by check or cash. Credit card purchases could not be processed there or in many other retail locations that lacked equipment for old-fashioned paper credit transactions.

Banks lost access to all of their online records and their ability to connect with other financial institutions. Business ground almost to a halt, save for the few simple transactions that required only a temporary paper record, such as cashing small checks or accepting deposits.

Businesses that operate entirely or significantly online -- and there are lots of them, from resorts and hotels to appraisal services, a seller of dehydrated food and a sign maker -- lost a day's business. In this winter of scant snowfall, one resort that relies heavily on snowmobilers -- typically last-minute seekers of good snow -- finally had really good conditions to report following two days of significant accumulation. But it had no way to get the word out.

There is a good news side to this incident as well. Lots of people did lots of good work to minimize the potential impacts of this outage, but our local, volunteer-driven, independent public radio station, [WTIP](#), deserves special mention. Throughout the day, it served as an essential relay for important information, such as the local, still-working telephone numbers quickly established as alternates to the defunct 911 system.

Indirectly, this incident reinforced Cook County's need for redundant communications links -- a need that the state and federal governments have an interest and an obligation in helping meet. (The lesson is indirect because the problem actually originated in Duluth, where there are numerous fiber cables available. In theory, Qwest should have been able to reroute our communications around the break point fairly quickly. Why that did not happen is a question state and federal officials might wish to ask Qwest.)

Along most of the North Shore, we are dependent on a single fiber cable. This incident illustrated too well what will happen if it breaks.

Jim Boyd a retired Star Tribune editor. He has been involved as a volunteer with an effort to establish a county-owned fiber-optic communications network for Cook County.

Comments (1)

While this is an important topic and I feel for the citizens of the area during this time, I take issue with:

"a need that the state and federal governments have an interest and an obligation in helping meet."

I have needs also, should I hold out my hand to the government? The obligation to insure a reliable link belongs to the communications provider, not the government.

Posted by Jeff Wold from MN | February 4, 2010 8:10 AM

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