

Landline Legislation Dials Up Worries in Nevada County

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A bill is making its way through the Assembly Appropriations Committee amid concerns about its impact on residents of areas without stable high-speed Internet access or cellphone reception — such as some areas of Nevada County.

State Assembly Bill 2395, introduced by Evan Low, a Silicon Valley Democrat, would allow telephone companies to phase out landline services. It will be considered in committee today in Sacramento. If it passes, the AT&T-backed legislation will go to the Assembly for consideration.

The board of supervisors of Nevada, Yuba and Sutter counties all have authored letters in opposition, because it does not do enough to protect residents of rural areas where a landline is the only reliable form of communication. The three counties are members of the Rural County Representatives of California, which also opposes the bill, said Yuba County Supervisor Roger Abe, county representative to the RCAC.

Nevada County Supervisor Nate Beason argued the bill could leave some Nevada County residents without phones.

“There’s some public safety issues and some issues with seniors who may be isolated in the rural county,” Beason said.

“If you’re living up in the foothills — in Brownsville, Camptonville and parts of Browns Valley and Loma Rica — you need a landline. Cellphones don’t work.”Randy FletcherYuba County Supervisor

As of 2014, only 6 percent of Californians resided in households with only a landline, and the number of landlines providing legacy telephone services declined an estimated 85 percent between 1999 and 2015. More than 90 percent of Californians use a smartphone or other mobile device, according to the bill.

“At some point in the future, it’ll be like this and the landline will be gone, but I don’t think that point is now,” Abe said. “They haven’t made a new way that is reliable enough, cost effective enough and available to (rural residents).”

The bill outlines a transition plan that would begin no sooner than Jan. 1, 2020. Before a telephone company can withdraw the traditional circuit-switched service, it must conduct an education and outreach program that includes information about alternative services and a timeline for the transition.

The alternative services must meet four requirements: voice grade access, real-time two-way voice communications, access to local emergency telephone systems, and Federal Communications Commission backup-battery standards.

“The act will ensure that alternative services are available to replace legacy services before the transition,” the bill states.

Whether the requirements are stringent enough to protect the public safety of rural residents, especially those in the foothills, is a question Yuba County Supervisor Randy Fletcher would like answered.

“If you’re living up in the foothills — in Brownsville, Camptonville and parts of Browns Valley and Loma Rica — you need a landline. Cellphones don’t work,” said Fletcher (in an interview conducted over his landline phone after a call to his cellphone was too garbled to be understood).

“There are medical issues, fire issues. You just couldn’t do it,” Fletcher said. “You’re going to throw us back into the Dark Ages.”

Fletcher has Internet through AT&T at his Browns Valley home, but it isn’t reliable enough to handle the Voice over Internet Protocol and Internet Protocol services. It often takes more than 30 seconds for webpages to load and the connection frequently times out, he said.

“For everyone up in this whole area, it’s a struggle. In a lot of cases people don’t want to hook up because it’s too slow or ineffective,” Fletcher said.

Rather than bringing the bill forward now, area Assemblyman James Gallagher, R-Plumas Lake, said the first focus should be on building out broadband and wireless services in rural areas of the state.

“I think it’s a little bit like putting the cart before the horse,” Gallagher said. “I am concerned that this bill could lead to people losing their landline, which in some areas of my district could be their only adequate source of communication.”

AT&T accepted federal grant money to expand into under-served and non-served areas, and talked about adding more wireless cell towers in rural, foothill and mountainous areas, Gallagher said.

“Let’s do that first before we talk about abandoning landlines,” Gallagher said.

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