

What are we, chopped liver? Where is Baltimore FiOS?

By Larry Perl, *Baltimore Messenger*, February 24, 2010

Matthew Weinstein has been asking that question a lot in the past month, especially at community meetings around north Baltimore.

In the past month, Weinstein has lobbied community associations in Charles Village, Homeland and Mt. Washington to join him in asking the question -- and he is seeking the support of the Greater Homewood Community Corp.

Weinstein, 46, is on the warpath against Verizon, which has brought FiOS, its heavily advertised brand of high-speed, fiberoptic Internet service, to much of the state, but not to Baltimore City.

And Weinstein, who lives in the Charles Village-Abell area, is not just a neighborhood gadfly or David versus Goliath. He's the Baltimore region and federal issues director of Progressive Maryland, a nonprofit advocacy organization.

And he has at least some support on the City Council, which is considering a non-binding resolution calling on Verizon to bring FiOS to the city.

Progressive Maryland has fought for lower energy pricing, more progressive personal and corporate income tax codes and the reduction of fraud in the workplace, among other issues in recent years, according to its Web site, www.progressivemaryland.org. Now, it is pushing hard for health care reform.

But Weinstein and Progressive Maryland are also taking Verizon to task for bypassing Baltimore as it laid the groundwork for FiOS in other jurisdictions.

"We're demanding equal treatment," Weinstein said in an interview Jan. 17 during a general membership meeting of the Charles Village Civic Association.

He said his lobbying effort has nothing to do with whether he likes FiOS personally.

"We're not looking at it as, will people like it. We're looking at it as a digital divide issue," he said.

Progressive Maryland and some city officials say Verizon doesn't want to spend the money to install the system in a densely populated urban area. Progressive Maryland says Baltimore is the only major jurisdiction in Maryland that is not yet wired for FiOS.

Verizon told the City Council that it has no plans to apply for a franchise agreement with the city, Progressive Maryland states in a flier that Weinstein handed out at the Charles Village meeting.

City Council member William Cole IV has introduced a non-binding resolution calling on Verizon to bring FiOS to Baltimore.

Cole said a coalition of community groups has formed to call for FiOS in the city, and that a public hearing on his resolution is being scheduled for March or early April.

Bringing FiOS to the city is important because Comcast has the market cornered on bundled Internet, phone and cable TV service, Cole said.

"We want the competition," he said. "It's frustrating that we're so far behind."

Cole said he thinks Verizon Maryland would like to bring FiOS to Baltimore but that its corporate office has "zero interest."

And he said there is an untrue rumor being spread, partly by Verizon representatives at Verizon stores and mall kiosks, that the City Council is blocking FiOS by charging too much in conduit rental fees for access to the city's underground wiring network.

City Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke, who represents north Baltimore, supports Cole's resolution, and criticized Verizon at the Charles Village meeting.

"They don't want to come into urban areas," Clarke said. "As soon as they get over their fear of urban infrastructure, we will welcome them."

In its flier that Weinstein handed out, headlined, "Where is Bmore FiOS?," Progressive Maryland concedes that installing FiOS in given geographic areas "involves a significant investment of resources."

Verizon advertises fiber optic technology as "communication at the speed of light," transmitting data at five times the speed of DSL or cable. All 32 volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica can be sent in less than a second, Verizon claims.

But Weinstein and other critics say Verizon doesn't want to spend the money for FIOS in Baltimore because it could be more expensive in an urban area.

Weinstein says it could be done less expensively by using existing phone wires, and Cole agrees.

"The development (of FiOS) in urban areas is not more difficult than in rural areas," Cole said.

In its flier, Progressive Maryland said Verizon delayed its wiring of the nation's capital for FIOS, too, but changed its mind after a grassroots campaign in Washington.

In an e-mail statement, Verizon doesn't deny that money is a factor in its decision to not invest in the city, at least for now.

"Verizon is not deploying FiOS in Baltimore City or in any other new areas in Maryland or across the country at this time because we're now focused on delivering our FiOS services in those communities where we already have approved cable franchises and where we already have begun to build our FiOS network," said spokeswoman Sandra Arnette. "We have extensive deployment obligations in several states and are working to fulfill them."

She also stated that Verizon decides where to deploy the system based partly on "the ability to rapidly deploy our network. This involves review of material and supply issues, workforce locations, technology locations and other related business factors."

But Arnette said that "just because we're not deploying FiOS in a particular area now doesn't mean we won't do so in the future. We just can't say when that will happen right now."

Cole said Verizon's reluctance to bring FiOS to the city "smacks of redlining," a claim that Arnette denied.

"Race, ethnicity and income are never factors in this decision," she said in her e-mail. "Verizon does not redline. We never have and never will. It's illegal, immoral and counter to our century-old legacy of providing good service to Baltimore residents. Our commitment to diversity is evident in many communities where FiOS is now offered, such as Dundalk, Essex, Glen Burnie, Milford Mills, Randallstown and Woodlawn."

But it's clear that the criticism is having an effect.

"We understand people's concerns, and we can and will carry those back to our business," Arnette said.