

Q&A on Verizon's failure to bring FiOS to Baltimore

by FERN SHEN, *Baltimore Brew*, April 26, 2010

Is Verizon deepening the digital divide by not offering Baltimore FiOS, its high-speed fiber optic Internet service?

There's a hearing on the question on Wednesday, called by Councilman William H. Cole IV. It's scheduled to take place in council chambers at 5 pm.

Verizon recently acknowledged that FiOS is not, for the foreseeable future, coming to Baltimore and a lot of other places that were expecting it. As one broadband industry-watching website put it, "the great FiOS experiment has ended — prematurely."

It's part of a dismal trend whereby the number of providers offering Internet service has been dwindling and the quality of service has been increasingly compromised, according to this Washington Post columnist.

The lack of competition is getting serious: the FCC has done research showing that 78 percent of American households have access to only two land-based broadband providers and that 13 percent have one.

As prep for the hearing, the brew offers a Q&A with Matthew Weinstein, Baltimore Region director of Progressive Maryland, which has spearheaded the Where is Bmore Fios? campaign and joined Cole in announcing this week's hearing.

Why is getting FiOS in Baltimore so important?

Fiber optic is the next great leap forward in data communication and technology. You look at all these countries that have higher rates of connectedness — Korea, Japan, France, Germany — the reason? They all have high-speed fiber optic systems. It's a digital divide issue, it puts our country at a disadvantage.

I guess that's your argument with Baltimore City, that it puts us at a disadvantage with the rest of the state?

Well sure, Baltimore County, Anne Arundel County, Howard County, Prince George's County, even Charles County — they all have FiOS. The idea that Baltimore has not been included is a huge slap in the face to the city.

What do you think is the reason Verizon has not extended the service to Baltimore?

We and others, including City Councilmember Bill Cole have been meeting for over a year with them and we cannot get a straight answer. Councilman Cole has gone to Verizon kiosks in the mall and been told 'It's the City Council's fault, it's all because of the relationship of Ken Harris to Comcast and how he wrote the franchise agreement with

Comcast.' Well that's just not true. We have looked at that franchise agreement and it has no exclusivity, anyone can compete.

Well what is going on here then, if it's not favoritism toward Comcast? Are they just favoring suburbs over cities because --

No, no, it makes no sense. There's FiOS in at least some parts of cities like Philadelphia, Trenton, Richmond, Pittsburgh, New York. I think this goes back to the history of redlining and disparate treatment by lots of companies to Baltimore — banks, supermarkets. They make the same assumptions in this case, that they can't make a profit here.

Why have they done it in those cities and not here?

Maybe they've been watching too much HBO. Seriously, it's infuriating and they need to be called out for it.

Can government force them to offer the service here? Is the state, the Public Service Commission, maybe, authorized to step in?

It is not regulated by a state agency. They (Verizon) make the decisions up in New York in their corporate headquarters. In D.C. there was a similar situation to what we have here now but D.C.'s Jobs with Justice got together a similar coalition to ours and after a whole public campaign by them, (Verizon) did negotiate a franchise agreement with the District. So I think it is public pressure, the fear of bad publicity, that is the only thing that works. We are modeling our campaign on theirs.

What about the argument that it's just technically difficult and expensive for them to bring FiOS to a city like Baltimore, with its old streets and aging infrastructure?

Not a valid argument. The city has and underground conduit for this thing. If you go to the city's application for Google fiber, they have pictures of the conduit and how extensive it is.

What are you hoping to have happen as a result of the hearing?

We're looking for the council to pass a resolution (and the Mayor to sign it) calling on Verizon to come in to Baltimore with FiOS.