

Blake: Either way, public pays

January 19, 2005



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If you vote for expensive public projects, you might suddenly find yourself also paying for related costs that you didn't get to vote on and hadn't even contemplated.

Come to think of it, you may pay the latter costs even if you didn't get to vote on the former.

It's just one of those lessons you can learn from reading the little enclosures in your utility bill. They're usually read only by sickos who, like myself, choose to seek out more misery than they already have. We know we're not supposed to. If they wanted us to read them, they'd make the type readable.

Anyway, in the current bills from Qwest is a small flier which tells us that starting March 10, the Public Utilities Commission willing, those of us in the eight metro Denver counties using the 303/720 area codes will be billed an extra 22 cents a month per phone line for three years.

Why this surcharge? Because Qwest seeks to "recover its costs of government mandated relocation of network facilities due to the T-REX and Colorado Convention Center projects."

They had to move wires and poles and what-have-you, and they want their money back. Apparently the project builders weren't required to bear those costs themselves.

The convention center was approved only by Denver voters in 1999; the T-REX project is financed by the highway bonds approved by voters statewide that year, and by RTD bonds simultaneously approved by district voters.

Speaking of statewide, Qwest has left the PUC an option. It said the commission may determine to charge relocation costs to all customers in the state and not just the eight-county metro area. In that case the monthly charge per access line would be only 12 cents a month for three years.

Hey, don't we like that better here! Stick the citizens of the Western Slope for work done in Denver! When you can't share the wealth, share the debt, we say. It's not just their water we want, but their cash. Besides, a few of them may drive the new and improved Interstate 25 some day, and even attend a trade show at the convention center.

Right now the PUC staff is reviewing the application to make sure that all the charges claimed were actually incurred.

So is the PUC's Office of Consumer Counsel, which will intervene in the case. "At this point we don't think the numbers are correct, but we'll review them," said acting director Jim Greenwood.

The total amount claimed by Qwest is \$7,038,641.

Those who don't like the surcharge have until early February to file written protests or ask to intervene. The PUC has tentatively set the issue for its Feb. 16 meeting.

This type of cost recovery by the telephone company hasn't been historically available. It was authorized by a 2003 bill, S.B. 238, sponsored by former Sen. Ken Chlouber, R-Leadville, and Rep. Joe Stengel, R-Littleton, the new House minority leader.

The bill breezed through easily. It passed the Senate 30-2 and the House 58-7. The papers paid the issue no mind.

But the impact of this 3-year assessment is just the beginning. Wait until the recently approved FasTracks project gets going. That will tear up a lot more land than the convention center and T-REX. Who knows how many more millions of dollars Qwest will have to spend moving their facilities?

No, Qwest won't need new legislation to get approval for the recovery of FasTracks costs. The 2003 bill thoughtfully contemplated all future relocation costs imposed by public projects. Only the PUC could say no.

Qwest asked for the surcharge now because "the projects are close to completion and we knew exactly what our costs were," said spokesman Michael Dunne.

If Qwest had expensive relocation costs, one can assume Xcel Energy had even more: steam and natural gas pipes, power lines, transformers etc. But it hasn't filed for any special recovery costs - and wasn't authorized to by the 2003 legislation, which applied only to telecommunications companies.

It's a good thing, considering the problems Xcel customers already have with the spike in natural gas prices. But don't cry for Xcel. It will be able to recover its relocation costs when it files its next rate case in early 2006.

Oh, the same unreadable Qwest flier tells us that the Federal Universal Service Charge is also going up, as is the charge for non-coin calls made from pay phones. But you've had enough bad news for today.