There is a request from the Matanuska Telephone Association (MTA) before the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that we believe is for the most part going unnoticed.  In essence, it will eliminate basic phone service in the west Mat-Su and southern Denali Boroughs.

To the best of our understanding the FCC under the Basic Exchange Telephone Radio Service (BETRS) requires MTA to provide what is referred to locally as “fixed wireless” to areas within their service area that have limited access to telephone service.  MTA sent a letter to its fixed wireless customers on Dec 19, 2017 stating they have applied to the FCC for approval to discontinue the service.  According to MTA fixed wireless serves about 250-450 customers (numbers vary depending on who you talk to in MTA) when this letter and application were sent.

https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/search/filings?q=filers.name:(\*matanuska\*)&sort=date\_disseminated,DESC

MTA’s reasoning for this action is there are evolving technologies that can better serve these customers. They state:

*“Mobile service has vastly improved in quality and availability making the BETRS*

*service unnecessary and substandard. MTA recently exited the wireless market and sold*

*the towers holding the BETRS equipment and its CDMA spectrum to another wireless*

*carrier. MTA believes that wireless service is more reliable and a better choice for*

*customers than the now obsolete BETRS service.”*

Attached to the letter was a list of service providers that MTA states have this ability.  It lists GCI, AT&T, Verizon along with HughesNet and Exede internet providers.  GCI and AT&T do not cover the area being affected and Verizon has very limited coverage that has already diminished in coverage area due to actions by MTA back in October(details below).  Exede does not offer voice to Alaska satellite internet customers and HughesNet covers only about 20% of the State and due to its low on the horizon satellite is very difficult if not impossible for most customers in the affected area to reach.

In reality, the coverage area in question is no better off than in past years. It has been the only system for telephone available to most of us west of the Susitna River.  It is basic, but it has provided bullet proof, reliable service for years.  I understand it is probably not a money maker for MTA, but this action will leave many customers without basic phone service completely.  MTA is moving quickly to shut this service down and appear to have been planning this action for quite some time.

To make matters worse, MTA sold off their wireless service to Verizon last year.  Most of us west of the Susitna River had MTA cell phones because they were the only cell phone that would work over here.  So we had to throw away our MTA phones and bought service/phones from Verizon to maintain that coverage.  I’ll admit it turned out to be better coverage.  While Verizon took over most of MTA’s towers they did not take over the tower by Shell Lake (Skwentna area).  I guess it was deemed too remote for Verizon’s liking.  MTA retained operational control and equipment that was Verizon compatible.  We, quite by accident, found out that MTA, without any notice last October, turned off a piece of equipment there that shrunk the coverage of that tower site from 75-100 miles down to about 25 miles. Most of us have also now lost our mobile cell capability.   This action is having a frightening impact on public safety not only for locals, but the large number of people that recreate in the area.  The Susitna and Yentna River drainages are significant recreational corridors.

When MTA negotiated with Verizon to take over cell service from MTA surely MTA had to know these actions would soon lead to loss of phone service to a number of its customers. MTA had to know the impact they would have on the remote areas of the Mt-Su and Denali Boroughs long before taking this action. Many of us feel we are being sacrificed in order to improve speed and service for those on the road system and more populated areas. This was a calculated move by MTA and Verizon knowing what the outcome would be. We feel we were duped into buying Verizon service not knowing we would soon lose that service too.

It is a complex issue with many facets based on justification that just doesn’t exist.  These actions will have devastating impact on locals, small business and more importantly on public safety.  We feel this needs to be scrutinized before it is quietly ushered away.  How ironic is it that Alaska news if filled with the coming of high speed internet for remote coastal villages and the western Mat-Su Borough loses basic telephone service.

The Mat-Su Borough region west of the Susitna River has been devastated by the loss of salmon runs over the last few years. Its impact is the equivalent of the company town where the factory shuts down. The people have boarded up their homes and businesses and left to find work. Those of us that have remained and are trying to rebuild businesses in the region only have telephone as a basic infrastructure. We have no fire, police, electric, sewer or water to bolster our businesses. All we have for infrastructure is telephone and this action will terminate that basic service for most businesses in the region. How do we survive?

Public safety will be severely compromised and people will likely die as a result of not being able to contact first responders. In a region that is already economically depressed this action will further depress property values.

The media, MTA and Verizon seem to have little interest in what is about to happen. While more towers go up along the Glenn and Parks Highways to eliminate any gaps in coverage for motorists we west of the Susitna River feel like we don’t matter. Do we?  WE NEED YOUR HELP!