

TRAVERSE AREA  
ASSOCIATION  
OF REALTORS®

99-353

February 17, 2000

Magalie Roman Salas  
Secretary, Federal Communications Commission  
445 12<sup>th</sup> St. S.W.  
TW-A325  
Washington, Dc. 20554

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To Whom it May Concern:

The purpose of this letter is to articulate my objection to the proposed merger of MCI WorldCom and Sprint Communications. This merger will exacerbate an already stifling and destructive business environment here in Northern Michigan.

I speak with some history: my employer is the Traverse Area Association of Realtors®. We provide a group Centrex program, a dial-up access to the property database used by over 600 professionals in a five-county area, and we are also an internet service provider for those same members. To remain competitive, and to provide an efficient communications environment for transacting real estate business in Northern Michigan we depend on choices, partnerships, and bargaining positions.

A recent example of the victimization which can occur when a small consumer (my association, with 200 lines) confronts a large corporation (MCI WorldCom) occurred during the last year. After a regional provider (Brooks Fiber) was purchased by MCI WorldCom, all local sales and support service was withdrawn from the Traverse City area. Real estate offices were waiting over 6 weeks to get new telephone lines, and other services were poor to non-existent. Because of the communications-sensitive nature of our members' businesses, we notified MCI WorldCom that we would change vendors, and negotiations began with Ameritech. However, six months after WorldCom was officially notified of our change, lines had not been released and members and the association were being over billed, in some cases by thousands of dollars.

To date, the conversion has not yet been successfully completed. We have filed four complaints with the Michigan Public Services Commission in an attempt to attract WorldCom's attention, and we have contacted our legislators as well. Some real estate offices had no phone service for up to three days as the switchover was being completed, and we have talked to MCI WorldCom

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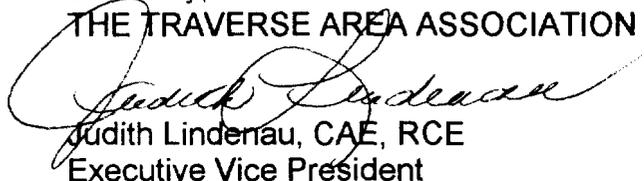
representatives in four different parts of the country (including the headquarters) with little or no response. As you can see from the accompanying article, this state of affairs has caused great concern in a growing community which depends on its telecommunications industry to maintain economic viability and quality of life.

I can only express my great concern when this proposed merger is discussed. Had the real estate community not had a strong alternative choice in Ameritech during this six weeks of business crisis, we would have been totally immobilized by a behemoth which considers us a small, rural customer. It is a perfect example of a monopolistic attitude which can be irrevocably destructive to an entire industry.

Please decide against this merger.

Sincerely,

THE TRAVERSE AREA ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Judith Lindenau", is written over the typed name and title.

Judith Lindenau, CAE, RCE  
Executive Vice President

Cc: TAAR Directors



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-- INDEX --

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December 26, 1999

## **Realty board entangled in phone snafu**

### **More than 30 agencies couldn't get through to the board's Multiple Listing Service**

**By BILL ECHLIN**  
**Record-Eagle staff writer**

TRAVERSE CITY - When your phone company can't call your business and has to send e-mail to fix a problem, you know you've got trouble.

And that's what the Traverse Area Board of Realtors had last week when it inherited a new phone service problem, while trying to correct another.

Starting Dec. 16, any Brooks Worldcom customer trying to call the realty board or many of its member companies got only a rapid busy signal.

Not only that, more than 30 realty agencies with hundreds of agents and brokers ran into the same problem. All were Brooks customers.

They couldn't get through to the board's Multiple Listing Service to find homes for sale or post new listings.

Unless, that is, they had Internet access, which was hooked to the board by an Ameritech phone line. They also found they couldn't call each other.

Even Brooks Worldcom experts trying to sort out the problem couldn't call the board, but instead had to send e-mail over the Ameritech line.

The problems last week capped months of dissatisfaction over phone service through a

network used by the realty board and many of its 33 agencies.

In August, the realty board decided to switch back to Ameritech for local phone service. It had been with Brooks Worldcom, Formerly Brooks Fiber Communications, for three years but grew weary of billing problems and long service delays.

Re/Max Bayshore of Traverse City, for instance, waited three months to get three additional phone lines when it hired three new agents, president Rick Stein said.

"I told the board, I would be the first in line to switch to Ameritech as soon as it decided to change over," Stein said. "It's been absolutely horrible. They give you no time frames and no service. We made three to five calls a week to Brooks Worldcom over the three months we were trying to get the new lines."

The decision in August to go back to Ameritech came after the board received several complaints like Stein's from members, said Judith Lindenau, executive vice president of the board.

After Brooks Fiber was bought up by MCI Worldcom earlier this year, the company pulled out its local sales representative and all service calls were routed to a service center in Oklahoma.

"We just couldn't get service and with no local representative, we couldn't get answers from MCI Worldcom," Lindenau said. "They made a lot of promises, but they never happened, plus there was no local technical support. Members were very angry."

Among the angriest was Kris Erickson, office manager for Spectra Real Estate and Spectra Construction Co.

"When we moved a year and a half ago, they (Brooks) lost our move order, which we put in nearly a month ahead of time," Erickson said. "We ended up going five weeks without phones and had to borrow lines from other companies in our building."

"We were also among the companies that were overcharged when the area code changed in May. We got a \$1,000 bill and they just called last week to say \$837 would be refunded."

Then came last week's snafu and realty agents couldn't call the board all week.

"Customer service and technical operations just fell apart," she said.

Lindenau said Ameritech service finally started up for the board's 51 lines Tuesday. That came after writing letters and filing complaints with the Michigan Public Service Commission and having the board's attorney threaten a lawsuit for damages. The board may yet sue once it has determined what the whole episode costs it and its members, she said.

"We made 40 calls to Brooks Worldcom and only got two live voices, and no phone calls were returned, until Stu Hollander, our attorney got through to their attorney late Tuesday," she said. "That's when things finally started happening. The Ameritech rep. said they knew exactly what was wrong, but couldn't get through to the MCI Worldcom techies."

Paul Adams, a spokesman for MCI Worldcom in Atlanta, Ga., said Wednesday that Ameritech shares blame for the foul-up. He said MCI Worldcom "released" the board's phone lines on Dec. 16 and had an Ameritech confirmation number for the switchover, but Ameritech gave his company no date.

"All we know is (service) came to an end at our system and that's as far as we can carry it," he said. "It's a whole new environment and working with incumbent phone companies (such as Ameritech) isn't always the most expedient process."

That didn't square, however, with what MCI Worldcom technicians told the board Wednesday. An e-mail message to Lindenau said the problem was related to a failure to update a national database of which numbers are assigned to which companies and that the company was correcting that.

Shortly after that message, the board's system began to work again.

Adams said people switching local phone services may want to consider something called concurrent service.

"Start with the new provider before you disconnect your old provider," he said. "You can have concurrent service with dual numbers for a few weeks until you eventually have your old

number switched to the new company."

Adams said the problems encountered by Brooks Worldcom customers are unusual and should not be interpreted as his company abandoning customers in the Traverse City market.

Recently MCI Worldcom was reported as looking at its local phone operations and considering concentrating only on larger metro markets while it puts more focus on long distance and Internet access services.

"We have more than 15,000 people in our service organization and while we may not have a dedicated agent for a given city, that doesn't mean we can't handle service needs," Adams said. "We still have local installers."

He added, however, that at this time MCI Worldcom may not actively pursue new customers in the Traverse City market.

"What might have been Brooks' market strategy may not be ours today," Adams said, "but we're certainly not abandoning customers."

Ameritech spokesman Terry Mulvihill said he was not surprised that MCI Worldcom would try to put the blame on his company.

"This is a dispute between the customer and Brooks and we're staying out of it," he said.



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