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Fire Island Erupts Over Verizon's Wireless Voice Link: New York AG Claims Verizon Violated Agreement

The future of telecommunications in the U.S. is being played out on the sandy beaches of Fire Island, NY. Forget about not being upgraded to fiber optic services. Customers are "extremely disappointed," "horrified," "very frustrated," with "grave distress and dissatisfaction" about Verizon's plan to stop fixing their phone lines and giving them an inferior wireless replacement, Voice Link, which can't handle basic plain old telephone service, "POTs" services like fax, DSL or even reliable e911 service.

Over 270 townsfolk and other interested parties, (like the fire department), out of only 500 full time residents, [have filed comments with the New York State Department of Public Service](#) that Voice Link, well, stinks.

But the drama continues on other fronts. On June 26th, 2013, [the New York State Attorney General's Office](#) asked the NY State Department of Public Service, which granted Verizon limited deployment of Voice Link on Fire Island, to halt all other deployments because the company violated the agreement and is attempting to force customers on the wireless Voice Link, from the Catskills to even New York City.

In [our previous article](#) we highlighted how Verizon Voice Link's deployment ties to Verizon and ATT's plan to abandon whole areas of the U.S. and decline to repair the copper wiring, even after a storm. The [phone companies](#) and a group called the American Legislative Exchange Council, ALEC, created 'model' legislation that has been burning through the states, removing basic obligations, from quality of service requirements, state commission oversight to even removing "carrier of last resort," where the company no longer has to provide basic services.

Why is all this important? Verizon's wireless products are not substitutes for a basic POTs phone line and yet we can expect whole areas of the U.S., instead of getting basic repairs or upgrades to 100-year-old copper wiring, will be forced onto "migrate" to a wireless service.

- **Voice Link** can not handle basic wired data applications such as fax or DSL, or basic dial-up Internet services, as well as medical alerts or alarm services or even reliable E911. See chart: [Voice Link vs POTs](#)

- **Home Fusion**, sometimes called "Cantenna," is a wireless broadband service that can't compete with DSL on price, much less act as substitute for cable. It would cost on average \$780.00 a month to watch basic cable. See chart [Home Fusion Vs Verizon DSL and FiOS](#)

The irony in all of this is that Verizon failed to properly upgrade the entire plant with fiber optic services and yet collected money to do so -- billions per state. We discussed the [situation in New Jersey where the entire state was to be upgraded to fiber](#) and Verizon collected billions to do it. New York State's laws are somewhat different. However, in 2009, the New York State Department of Public Service [increased basic rates](#) to pay for massive fiber optic upgrades -- i.e., Verizon FiOS.

"We are always concerned about the impacts on ratepayers of any rate increase, especially in times of economic stress," said Commission Chairman Garry Brown. "Nevertheless, there are certain increases in Verizon's costs that have to be recognized. This is especially important given the magnitude of the company's capital investment program, including its massive deployment of fiber optics in New York. We encourage Verizon to make appropriate investments in New York, and these minor rate increases will allow those investments to continue."

NOTE: There are some other caveats about this increase, but this increase was not minor as the company also raised the price on almost every other service, from inside wiring to directory assistance and this was only one of several increases over the last decade. See [Phone Service pricing in NYC, 1980-2012](#).

Meanwhile, after the ink was dry, Verizon stated it would not be replacing the copper wiring with fiber optic upgrades, but would abandon the copper wire. This means that every customer who is on copper, including the fire station, city hall and the police department, not to mention business and residential customers have been paying for upgrades to the wires -- which never happened -- including Fire Island Verizon customers, and for services they will most likely never receive.

Fire Island Flames Verizon.

Let's go through the customer issues and hear directly from the residents, small businesses, the Fire Department and others about their take of Verizon shutting off the only communications wire on the island and replacing it with wireless. NOTE: [click on 'public comments'](#).

Seniors Rely on Phone or Broadband Service.

While one senior writes that he only uses a wired phone (and does not have a cell phone), another points to losing their broadband service as well.

Elderly man with only a land line: "I am an 88 year old owner of a house and I have a land line. I have no cell phone and depend on this land line. I'm astonished by the news that Verizon wants to abandon this service. Please do not let this happen."

Elderly man who lost DSL service and Internet:

As a resident of Ocean Beach, Fire Island, I am expressing my grave distress and dissatisfaction with Verizon's intent/decision not to repair their copper wired basic landline/DSL service destroyed or damaged in my community. This is unacceptable!!!! We have no other options for landlines/DSL.

The Public Is at Risk for Emergencies and Fire Suppression

The Fire Department wrote:

The recent decision for Verizon to discontinue copper land lines to the communities on Western Fire Island, specifically the communities of Dunewood, Fair Harbor and Lonelyville, and substitute wireless services -- Voice Link or Home Connect -- is of great concern to the Fair Harbor Fire Department that provides year-round EMS and fire suppression services to the residents of those three communities... Simply put, this proposal puts our residents and their property at risk.

Verizon's Customer Service and Billing Issues are Common

In our previous interviews with people in Manhattan who had lost service because of Sandy, one of the biggest complaints was the lack of training, much less accurate information being supplied by customer service staff.

Besides having lost their service, this family has been given the run-around, even when a medical condition is involved.

"I also am very frustrated with the customer service. I had originally called Verizon about repairing my copper land line, explaining that my son has a medical condition and that I didn't want to be dependent on my cell phone if we should have an emergency. They said they would do their best to repair the copper land line. Two days later someone called about Voice Link. When I asked about the copper line, they said nobody would have copper lines. This is a flat out lie. I know many people who have working copper lines. When I explained the person I spoke to previously had told me they would try to repair my copper line due to my son's medical condition, they said they had no note of this in our records, and repeated there were no copper land lines.

No Sound and Service Quality for Voice or Data

According to one residential customer,

"When first installed, Voice Link seemed to function adequately. However, quality has significantly deteriorated. It is difficult for us to hear callers and callers report that we sound like we are in a wind tunnel. I also have a Verizon jetpack -- speed seems to be limited by the number of people using the signal, i.e., it's very difficult to get on line at 6 p.m. Severe limitation of data available is also troubling at a time when Verizon is advertising its VIOS service with unlimited movie streaming.

Is Sandy Simply an Excuse to Close Down the Networks?

Manhattan customers we interviewed that lost service because of Sandy pointed out that on the same street Verizon had working services, including FiOS, and the company made no effort to fix the 'entire' block. The Commissioner of Ocean Bay Park Fire District wrote of a similar issue.

Verizon would have you believe that their facilities were destroyed by Super Storm Sandy and could not be repaired. Going east from Ocean Beach, there are 12 strands of fiber cable and going west, Verizon also has fiber capabilities into Kismet, the last west end town. In Ocean Bay Park, for example, the only houses that were badly impacted were on the ocean. We still have people with dial tone working at this time, and in Ocean Beach, where the Verizon Central Office is located, 90 percent of the businesses are still up and working on copper, along with some residents... Verizon's CEO publicly acknowledged way before Sandy, that Verizon was getting out of the landline business. The storm facilitated this for them.

There Were Complaints before Sandy.

As one resident of Seaview, Fire Island writes, there have been problems long before Sandy.

Finally, I must draw your attention to the numerous complaints, documented communications and expressed frustrations that existed LONG BEFORE Hurricane Sandy. Verizon had literally abandoned holes they dug for "repair" of land lines. We continually asked for these unsafe, pretty large holes to be closed or made safe. No action was taken. It seems to me that the plan to abandon copper wire was in place long before Hurricane Sandy. And I conclude that these abandoned holes and half-repairs exacerbated the damage to their copper wire infrastructure; they were trying to sneak out of town, and then were blessed with a storm of enormous proportions that seemingly excused them from acting responsibly.

Economic Harms to Small Business Based on Data Services Over POTS Lines No Longer Available.

While the telcos' plan is to close down whole areas of the U.S.'s copper networks it is clear that the regulators have no clue about the current uses of the copper wires that are not voice-only phone calling and how all this especially impacts work at home and small businesses.

My name is Peter Greenberg and I am the Travel Editor for CBS News. I am also a long time resident and volunteer firefighter on Fire Island. ... As someone who broadcasts each week from Fire Island (Verizon installed an ISDN line to my office at my residence many years ago), this decision by Verizon effectively cuts me off from both the CBS television network as well as my nationally syndicated radio show, broadcast from Fire Island as well. In addition, it literally disenfranchises me from doing live radio reports over the ISDN line for dozens of radio stations that call me on Fire Island each week on my land line for live remotes... It cuts me off from receiving or sending faxes. And I can tell you from experience that given the volume of my internet traffic and the need to have a quality signal, my ability to send and receive photos, videos and other broadcasting media will be compromised to the point of being worthless.

Here, There, Everywhere - Returning to New York State.

Verizon, New York agreed to a limited "pilot test" in the western part of Fire Island. And yet the New York Attorney General's office stated that "the company knowingly failed or neglected to comply with ... a Commission's order." Verizon's plans are much different. The [Communications Workers of America \(CWA\) Union](#) writes:

Verizon is presently undertaking to expand Voice Link in and around Monticello, among other parts of the Hudson Valley. Verizon has also performed dozens of Voice Link installations in New York City, including attempting to switch an 81-unit senior residence to Voice Link.... As early as mid-May, Verizon dispatched employees to install Voice Link as replacement service to all 81 units of a building at 308 E. 8th St. in lower Manhattan, but the elderly residents of the building insisted that Voice Link not be installed after learning that it would not support their LifeAlert health monitoring equipment. To CWA's knowledge, the building remains without phone service at the present time.... Verizon has also installed Voice Link on a limited basis in the Boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens.

The AG has requested hefty financial penalties and damages to those outside Fire Island, but Verizon's Voice Link's plans are not news as the company has been pushing Voice Link in other states.

This could be you.

I leave you with this thought: This could be you, especially in states where they already removed basic consumer protections. We talk about the Digital Divide. What's next, smoke signals? Drums and Morse Code instead of data streams? Here are Fire Island resident's opening statements to the New York State commission.

- We are writing to express our opposition to the proposal by Verizon to substitute the wireless Voi ...
- I am extremely disappointed in Verizon's continued efforts to abandon the copp ..

- As a lifelong resident of Fire island, I would like to lodge a protest against Verizon's decision to ...
- Verizon is not operating in good faith but rather pushing us toward a higher-cost and lower-value so ...
- I for one can't see this working. In the event of a storm and the lights are out how do they char ...
- Verizon would have you believe that their facilities were destroyed by Super Storm Sandy and could n ...
- I am a lifelong (summer) resident of Fire Island and I strongly oppose allo ...
- I strongly oppose the elimination of landline services by Verizon. I rely on these services for the ...
- Verizon must remain committed to providing service to all areas. If they are to substitute wireless ...
- I strongly object to allowing Verizon to abandon land line support...
- Please don' t allow them to do that. Verizon in the land line service is a monopoly. We need this s ...
- I would like it to be known that I strongly disagree with Verizon's request to discontinue landlines ...
- As a long time Verizon customer, I am very disappointed with Verizon's decision to abandon land-line ...
- When first installed, Voice Link seemed to function adequately. However, quality has significantly ...
- My family has owned a home in Ocean Beach, Fire Island since 1952. In 1986 my wife and I purchased I'm one of the few people in OBP who has a working landline. Verizon is refusing to provide DSL serv...
- I am a year round resident of Fire Island. My home was damaged in the "Sand ...
- On behalf of my 84 year old mother who is 60 year resident of Ocean Bay Park, Fire Island and on beh On June 11th, 2013, I contacted Verizon to let them know that we were experiencing loud static noise...
- I have been a resident of Ocean Beach since my childhood and a customer of Verizon in New York City...
- Please require Verizon to provide a telephone service to my home in Saltaire on Fire Island. As year round residents and business owners, we are horrified by Verizon's a using a ...