

STATE OF VERMONT
PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION

CASE NO. 18-3231-PET

PETITION OF THE VERMONT DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC
SERVICE FOR AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE
SERVICE QUALITY PROVIDED BY TELEPHONE
OPERATING COMPANY OF VERMONT, INC., D/B/A
CONSOLIDATED COMMUNICATIONS, INC. --

December 4, 2018
6:30 p.m.

71 S. Main Street
St. Albans, Vermont

Public Hearing held before the
Vermont Public Utility Commission, at the Bellows Free
Academy, 71 South Main Street, St. Albans, Vermont, on
December 4, 2018, beginning at 6:30 p.m.

P R E S E N T

COMMISSION MEMBERS: Sarah Hofmann

STAFF: Gregg C. Faber, Utilities Analyst

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1 COMM. HOFMANN: Hi everybody. If
2 people want to take their seats, we can get going.
3 I'll do some introductory material, but there is also
4 a sign-up sheet down here in front. If you want to
5 speak later if you could sign up, that way we will
6 know your name and call you in the order you sign up.

7 Good evening. This is a public hearing
8 in Case No. 18-3231-PET, which is an investigation
9 into the service quality provided by Telephone
10 Operating Company of Vermont, Incorporated doing
11 business as Consolidated Communications.

12 My name is Sarah Hofmann, and I'm a
13 Commissioner of the Vermont Public Utility
14 Commission. With me tonight is one of our staff,
15 Gregg Faber. We also have representatives from the
16 Vermont Department of Public Service. A lawyer,
17 Sarah Aceves, down in the front. Carol Flint from
18 the Consumer Affairs and Public Information. And a
19 new employee at the Department, Beth Aiken.

20 I also see we have Deb Bouffard from
21 the company and with her a number of people from the
22 Consolidated Communications group. And, you know, if
23 you need to have a question answered, you probably
24 can approach them later, and they would be happy to
25 talk with you.

1 The purpose of tonight's public hearing
2 is to hear from you members of the public about your
3 experience with Consolidated's service quality.
4 Although public comments do not become part of the
5 formal evidence in the case, your comments can be
6 helpful in raising new issues or perspectives that
7 the commission should consider. So we look forward
8 to receiving your input.

9 Today's hearing is not the only
10 opportunity to submit comments. You can provide
11 written comments using the commission's electronic
12 document management system called ePUC which is
13 available online using the links on the commission's
14 website, by direct mail or by email. Please be sure
15 to reference Case No. 18-3231-PET when submitting
16 your comments. You can also subscribe to the case in
17 ePUC which means you will receive an email
18 notification of any commission orders or findings
19 made by the parties in the case.

20 We have handouts here. We will put
21 those down in the front as well that provide
22 information on filing comments following the case.
23 In addition to submitting comments, certain people
24 may wish to intervene in the case and participate as
25 a formal party. If you have questions about

1 intervention or becoming a party in this case, please
2 speak with members of the commission staff, either
3 myself or Gregg. The deadline for intervening is
4 coming up on December 11. And we have -- you'll see
5 on ePUC you'll see copies of what the schedule is in
6 this case.

7 This hearing is being transcribed by a
8 court reporter. Thank you. The transcript of this
9 public hearing will also be available on ePUC. If
10 you wish to speak tonight, please write your name on
11 the sign-up sheet that is right down here at the
12 front of the stage. This will assist the court
13 reporter with the correct spelling of your name and
14 help make the process more orderly.

15 We will open up the floor for public
16 comments. We ask that people use the microphones
17 that have been set up. Let's get started, because I
18 can see we at least have one member of the public who
19 is willing to speak. And so we will obviously take
20 you first.

21 Gregg, if you could get his name. Can
22 you get the spelling? If you could start by just
23 stating your name and spelling for the court
24 reporter, and I know you're going to tell me it's
25 Smith, right?

1 MR. CHASE: First, do I get a prize for
2 traveling the furthest? I'm from Craftsbury. My
3 name is Rudy Chase. R-U-D-Y Chase.

4 COMM. HOFMANN: Thank you very much.

5 MR. CHASE: Okay. I have two, possibly
6 three concerns. This has to do with my phone in
7 Craftsbury. Last year we had our phone worked on.
8 After the phone was corrected, we could no longer get
9 the call waiting/caller ID which had worked
10 previously. Doesn't work now.

11 We have called FairPoint, Consolidated,
12 a number of times about this, and we have been, I
13 feel, kind of led around a little bit. "Well it's
14 got to be your phone," and "It's got to be this," and
15 "It's got to be that. Try this. We will talk to you
16 about that after you tried these other things."

17 This worked until the technician came
18 to our house, and it doesn't work any longer. We are
19 continuing to pay for that feature, and we are not
20 getting the benefit of that feature. This came after
21 I complained about robo calls. About a year ago, we
22 had a robo call at 2:30 in the morning. I have a
23 mother-in-law that's quite ill, and you can
24 understand with the phone ringing that time of the
25 morning, of great concern. We jumped out of bed.

1 And it was a robo call from somewhere selling some --
2 something that, you know, you know how those are.

3 So I called Consolidated about that. I
4 actually called the PSB. I ended up calling the FCC
5 in Washington about this particular thing. We were
6 sold a call blocking/call intercept feature on our
7 phone which I just want -- you know, we are the
8 victim here. And yet we have to pay a little bit
9 more to have our phone intercepted or the calls
10 intercepted. And I just -- there is something about
11 that that just isn't right.

12 And part of that is is that I was
13 informed by either the FCC or possibly even
14 Consolidated, that these scammers are buying blocks
15 of numbers, and so I don't want to take too much of
16 an anti point of view here anymore than I probably
17 will, but Consolidated is selling these blocks of
18 numbers, and then they are selling me the service to
19 block the numbers that they are selling. Somewhere
20 along the line that just doesn't seem proper. It
21 doesn't seem like I should have to pay for something
22 that they potentially are selling.

23 Along the line now, we are still
24 getting scam calls, but they are getting smarter.
25 They are now using numbers, and they are using a word

1 description, so that the call intercept is no longer
2 working for these. Just last week I got one from a
3 number in Craftsbury. I answered it, and it was a
4 travel agency selling condos, and I'm pretty sure in
5 Craftsbury we don't have travel agencies, and we
6 don't have condo sales. So I told the person on the
7 phone you're a scammer, good job, you got me.
8 Craftsbury number, all these kinds of things, but it
9 still goes on. I know it's a big problem.

10 FCC told me it was a big problem, I
11 know it's being worked on. But in the meantime, I
12 bought the service of call intercept, and now they
13 have circumvented that, so I really can't use call
14 intercept because those calls are getting through.
15 They are just getting smarter. And I guess I'm going
16 to just ask a rhetorical question. Should I still
17 have to pay for something that obviously isn't
18 working?

19 So there is two things. I've got the
20 call waiting/caller ID that doesn't work anymore.
21 And I have this call intercept that's already being
22 out foxed by the scammers.

23 So I'm going to move on to the second
24 issue. My son lives just across the border of
25 Craftsbury into Wolcott. From the time he moved into

1 his house until about a week ago, he's had incredibly
2 lousy service. He would call me up or vice versa, a
3 lot of static on the line, sometimes to the point of
4 having to hang up because there is so much static.
5 There's been a lot of complaints. I always get lip
6 service. We will send somebody out there to look at
7 it. One guy came about a month ago, thought he had
8 found the issue. There was some rubber boot that was
9 letting water, humidity in, and he thought he had
10 fixed it. And a week later -- they ended up losing
11 their phone service entirely for 11 days.

12 I happened to be at their house when
13 the technician, the latest one came. He said yes, I
14 know it. He said everybody on this road has issues,
15 everybody knows that the copper is bad actually from
16 Craftsbury village up to this point. So I guess
17 again a rhetorical question, but if everybody knows
18 that the copper is bad, then why isn't it getting
19 fixed? If that's a common knowledge with
20 Consolidated/FairPoint or whoever it is. This is not
21 days, this has gone on for years, my son's service,
22 and yet as far as I know, I'm quite sure he's still
23 paying the full bill for good quality service. He's
24 had lousy service and lousy quality, up until -- I
25 will say -- this latest technician just gave me the

1 impression that he was going to work on it until it
2 got fixed properly. As of today, it is still working
3 properly. There is no static in the line, but his
4 words were the copper is bad all the way to
5 Craftsbury village.

6 So I think that, you know, if we want
7 to improve service and we want to have satisfied
8 customers, if you know there is a problem, let's go
9 out and fix it. Okay.

10 So then my last point and this is
11 really to the Public Service Board. I would caution
12 that you be very, very careful about these bundled
13 packages. In Craftsbury not only do we not have
14 travel agencies, but we don't have a lot of
15 competition with phone companies. So if I get my
16 phone through Consolidated, I get my Internet through
17 Consolidated, if I wanted to go to say an iPhone that
18 I could use voice over Internet, I could cancel my
19 phone service, but Consolidated still owns the
20 Internet service. And from where I sit, there is a
21 couple of things here. First of all, I hope you're
22 aware of that this is slowly heading towards like a
23 singularity here that one company is going to own all
24 of the communications and data for towns like
25 Craftsbury, and I'm sure there is many, many more out

1 there.

2 The other thing is that when you
3 bundle, there is always a price, you know, try this,
4 you'll save \$5, \$10 a month on your bill. Somehow
5 those prices just always seem to trickle back up to
6 where they were. And I understand how business
7 works. You get a grab, you get a hook, you get
8 somebody in, and then but they trickle back up, and
9 we think we are getting a better deal. Year or two
10 later we are paying as much or more than we were in
11 the beginning.

12 And so I'm concerned about the monopoly
13 of something like this. I'm also worried about this
14 price that trickles upwards. And again, I would just
15 caution the Public Service Board that bundled
16 packages, especially in the outlying areas, I know
17 there is a lot more competition in Burlington, and
18 you know, Rutland and St. Albans and places like
19 that, but we don't have those options.

20 And just the other day my wife did call
21 and she, you know, she was suggesting that maybe we
22 cancel our landline and would we have enough band
23 width on our wifi. Well yes, you've got this. But
24 you could have more to guarantee that your service
25 would be great and you could also get movies. So

1 here we go again. We are going to eliminate possibly
2 our landline, and now we are going to pay more for
3 wifi. So in the end, there is no savings.

4 I think the companies probably have
5 that figured out that this issue of kind of coming to
6 a singularity where we have got a single company that
7 is either involved in phone, Internet, we are bundled
8 on our satellite TV, I know cable companies are
9 bundled in other locations, that should be of great
10 concern to everybody here. And with that, I'm set.

11 COMM. HOFMANN: Thank you very much. I
12 wondered if I could ask you two simple clarifying
13 questions. The first was you had indicated that you
14 had been paying for this feature, the two things
15 caller ID and the other one. How long have you been
16 paying for them and not receiving those services?

17 MR. CHASE: Pretty much from day one,
18 so about a year.

19 COMM. HOFMANN: About a year. And you
20 also said your son has had terrible service until?

21 MR. CHASE: For years.

22 COMM. HOFMANN: For years. And can you
23 name numbers? How long has he been there?

24 MR. CHASE: He has been in this
25 particular house five, maybe six years.

1 COMM. HOFMANN: Thank you very much for
2 your comments. Any other public members who would
3 like to speak? Yeah, please do. If you could write
4 your name down.

5 MR. KALTER: I'll walk up there and
6 I'll write my name down.

7 COMM. HOFMANN: Thank you. And then if
8 you say your name and spell it for the court
9 reporter.

10 MR. KALTER: My name is Howard Kalter.
11 K-A-L-T-E-R. I've got a couple of things. Some are
12 positive, are nice. Others probably won't be as
13 nice.

14 The technicians that I've ever dealt
15 with, with Consolidated, because I have a place in
16 Colchester; also have a place up in Montgomery. The
17 technicians, all the same. I have to -- I think most
18 of those that I've ever dealt with have forgotten
19 more than most people will ever learn. So that's
20 positive. The problem I've got is if you've got a
21 problem, you dial that stupid 800 number, okay.
22 Might as well talk to a brick wall.

23 I had major problems in Colchester with
24 extreme static. I finally got through to the 800
25 number after many, many phone calls. Stated the

1 problem. My phone was inoperative. She gave me a
2 ridiculous date out in the future, and I said that's
3 unacceptable. I said it does not work. I need a
4 phone that works. And she ended up hanging up the
5 phone on me. That lit my fuse.

6 I called the Public Service Board.
7 Well took me awhile to find, you know, because you
8 changed your name. It made it difficult. So my mind
9 is Public Service Board, you know. I called y'all.
10 Y'all's response was fantastic. And it didn't take
11 long I got a phone call from Consolidated. The woman
12 -- you could not ask for a person trying to be
13 helpful. And she gave me her phone number on her
14 desk. And it was a main extension.

15 So she said, "Let's have a three-way
16 call," and she got ahold of that 800 service area,
17 wherever the hell it is, excuse the French. They
18 gave her the same runaround they gave me. I kept my
19 mouth shut because she said she would talk with them.
20 Once they disconnected she says "I'll take care of
21 it." Within 15 minutes she called me back and said
22 they will be out there tomorrow morning and fix your
23 phone. And the technician was there, and it took him
24 about five minutes to fix it, because there is a box
25 just up the road about a half mile that fails all the

1 time. Boom, fixed. Everything is perfect. So I got
2 positive comments for them.

3 But what I hate is that 800 number.
4 That you call that number, and you might as well talk
5 to a wall, because you will not get any service when
6 calling that 800 number. If you can get to somebody
7 local right here, the service is fantastic. So both
8 ways. Right?

9 As a retired executive, I would love to
10 be in charge of that 800 number because it's easy to
11 fix. You look at them and say, "This is a job." And
12 as soon as the first person that doesn't do it you
13 look at them and say, "You're fired. Next." And
14 when the second person does it they are fired. And
15 guess what. People salute real quick and say this
16 guy is serious. What they need is get somebody
17 serious there and fix that 800 number. Because the
18 technicians around here that I've talked to, if you
19 can get service, it's good.

20 Now my second item is I have been using
21 DSL for forever. Okay. Before dirt was invented.
22 Best I can get lately, I don't know who's done what
23 or changed, but absolute best I can get, and I'm not
24 sure what I'm paying for it, is .8 megabits per
25 second, which is pretty poor Internet service. That

1 is slow response. Takes awhile for things to
2 download. And Consolidated is seriously looking at
3 -- I probably will hook up to HughesNet and go
4 satellite. Because -- can't do it now because the
5 ground is frozen. But come spring, seriously will be
6 looking and seeing if, with the roof overhang, their
7 standard practice is you've got to get a longer
8 extended bracket, because I've got to go over the
9 roof to where the satellite exists. So but the DSL
10 response has gotten (indicating thumbs down) not
11 positive. It's getting slow, and I'm not sure why.
12 That's it.

13 COMM. HOFMANN: Thank you very much.
14 And I want to give credit where credit is due.
15 Although you may have called the PUC, probably who
16 would have actually helped you on that three-party
17 phone call were the people sitting over here in the
18 corner from the Department of Public Service. Yes.

19 MR. KALTER: I forget who the girl was.
20 But --

21 COMM. HOFMANN: I'm glad you got some
22 help.

23 MR. KALTER: But the service -- the
24 response was fast.

25 COMM. HOFMANN: Good.

1 MR. KALTER: And when Consolidated --
2 the group in Maine that called me, the woman there
3 was absolutely outstanding. So Consolidated has some
4 extremely good people up here that try to respond,
5 try to make sure things are perfect. It's -- don't
6 call the 800 number.

7 COMM. HOFMANN: Thank you very much.
8 Any other member of the public here that would like
9 to speak?

10 (Sound of vacuuming)

11 COMM. HOFMANN: Starting the vacuum up.
12 Okay. If there is no other person who
13 wants to speak from the public, we will adjourn the
14 hearing. I will point out we do have the Department
15 of Public Service here and Consolidated folks if any
16 of the public members wish to speak with them. But
17 thank you very much for coming out tonight, and thank
18 you for driving from Colchester; Craftsbury. Thank
19 you for driving so far to be with us. Good night.

20 (Whereupon, the proceeding was
21 adjourned at 6:55 p.m.)
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C E R T I F I C A T E

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I, Kim U. Sears, do hereby certify that I recorded by stenographic means the Public Hearing re: Case No. 18-3231-PET, at the Bellows Free Academy, 71 So. Main Street, St. Albans, Vermont, on December 4, 2018, beginning at 6:30 p.m.

I further certify that the foregoing testimony was taken by me stenographically and thereafter reduced to typewriting and the foregoing 17 pages are a transcript of the stenograph notes taken by me of the evidence and the proceedings to the best of my ability.

I further certify that I am not related to any of the parties thereto or their counsel, and I am in no way interested in the outcome of said cause.

Dated at Williston, Vermont, this 5th day of December, 2018.



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