

Comcast gave us what we wanted

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Exactly eight months ago in this space, I explained why I'd be voting 'yes' for the April 1 Tri-Cities' municipal broadband referendum despite the fact that my wife and I have chosen for more than a decade to not have cable television in our home.

I suggested that the broadband plan for telephone, Internet and cable television service, cooperatively put forth by Batavia, Geneva and St. Charles city governments, seemed well-conceived, self-supporting and sensible. Its high-speed Internet component could help attract business. And, our communities' decades-long record of reliable and reasonably priced local electric service - instead of the oft-maddening experiences in neighboring towns with the monopoly that is ComEd - presented a solid and relevant example as to what we could expect from broadband service as a local public utility.

I wrote on March 19, in part: "Our municipal officials have a strong incentive to make all this work, one that the telecom giants will never have: at least twice monthly, they must sit in an open meeting... with their names posted in front of them. If things don't turn out as promised, they know they'll have citizens standing across the desks from them demanding to know why."

But the same week I wrote that, Comcast was running slick full-page advertisements in this newspaper and others, with well-paid copywriters' soothing prose urging residents to "stick with what you know... we're experienced in our business..., city governments can't possibly match our rates and service," etc.

Perhaps predictably, on April 1, a decisive 60 percent majority of residents literally gave their vote of confidence to Comcast instead of to their local elected officials - who had no choice but to accept the voters' decision and move on to other pressing matters.

Also predictably, Comcast waited barely six months before implementing - surprise! - a sweeping channel-shuffle that stole a net of 12 available channels from its "basic" service and a rate increase that raised many users' bills by 20 percent to 30 percent.

And, just as predictably, residents in all three cities - many of whom had either voted "no" on municipal broadband April 1 or hadn't bothered to vote at all - called city hall to complain.

In Geneva, most of the calls went to information-systems supervisor Peter Collins, who stated the obvious in his response: "The city has no control over a monopoly."

My characterization might be less diplomatic: Comcast, in its con-artistry of smooth springtime reassurances followed by a sledgehammer autumn price hike, is simply giving us what the majority voted for on April 1.

But why not now properly give Comcast a similar show of contempt in return? Start by writing a check for what you owe on your next cable bill, and write "CANCEL" in big red letters across the invoice. Then, if you must, call one of the satellite TV providers and make the appropriate change over arrangements. They're likely to respond quickly and cheerfully- they, after all, still have competition.

Or, if you're feeling bold, do what our household did 12 years ago when a \$4.50 monthly cable fee went to \$30 - kick the 100-channel habit altogether. This means you'll have to put an antenna up on your roof the way your dad did.

Use some of the time you'll save to visit the public library and, perhaps, to attend a city council meeting, to urge aldermen to reconsider putting the municipal broadband referendum back on the ballot.

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