

Collins: Capping cell subsidies could be matter of life and death

By Michael Collins
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Cell-phone companies were predictably perturbed by an advisory panel's recent recommendation that the federal government cap subsidies to companies that provide phone service in rural areas.

But they're not the only ones troubled by the decision.

Ambulance and fire service providers are warning that the cap could jeopardize public safety because it would impede efforts to expand wireless phone service into rural areas of East Tennessee.

"There are still a lot of rural areas in Tennessee that do not have adequate cell-phone coverage," said Rob Webb, general manager of Rural/Metro of East Tennessee, which provides fire and ambulance services in Knox County and ambulance service in Blount, Franklin and Loudon counties.

Capping the subsidies would take away revenue that was supposed to be an incentive for wireless carriers to build communications networks in sparsely populated areas.

If that incentive is gone, wireless providers will be less inclined to erect cell phone towers in rural areas that aren't currently served. That, in turn, will mean that people in those areas will find it hard to summon an ambulance or fire crew in the event of an emergency.

Emergency providers, such as Rural/Metro, had asked the Federal Communications Commission not to impose the cap, arguing that cell phone service is critical to the personal safety of Tennesseans.

But an advisory panel recommended in late November that the agency go ahead with the cap, which would be placed on the Universal Service Fund.

Telecommunications carriers pay a percentage of their revenues into the fund, which then makes direct payments to companies that offer phone service in rural areas where the cost of providing that service can be expensive.

The fund has come under fire for what critics say is out-of-control spending and waste of taxpayers' dollars. Thus, the Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service recommended capping the "high cost" portion of the fund at \$4.5 billion a year.

The FCC isn't obligated to follow the recommendation, but Chairman Kevin Martin has said he supports it.

That concerns emergency service providers like Webb, who said cell-phone service is either limited or nonexistent in many rural areas, such as an 11-mile stretch of U.S. 129 known as the Dragon.

The highway, which cuts through the Little Tennessee River Gorge linking Tennessee and North Carolina, is a popular route with motorcycle enthusiasts because of its numerous hairpin curves.

Yet, "that entire area has almost no cell-phone coverage," Webb said. "We're constantly having motor vehicle accidents up there on the weekend, where people are having to drive sometimes 30 minutes to get to a home where they can call for emergency assistance."

Thousands of people drive the roads in and around the Great Smoky Mountains National Park every day. But no cell-phone service exists in parts of the park, Webb said.

Even along Interstate 40 between Knoxville and Nashville, places exist where cell-phone service is spotty or nonexistent.

In Knox County, area hospitals are getting ready to invest in technology that will allow them to use cell phones to transmit EKGs from the ambulance to the emergency room.

"In those rural areas, we have no way to submit those EKGs to the hospital until you come down to a cell phone coverage area," Webb said. "That could be delayed as much as 15 to 30 minutes."

In those kinds of situations, quality cell-phone coverage isn't a luxury. It can be the difference between life and death.

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