

May 11, 2010

To: Acton Town Manager  
Acton Cable Committee  
Acton Comcast Representative

From: Alice A. Shafer  
Clerk, Audubon North Board of Governors  
120 Audubon Drive  
Acton, MA 01720

RE: Request for Assistance from the Acton Cable Committee

As most people are aware, "seniors" who are no longer employed, manage their financial affairs on fixed incomes. All of us who struggle to keep our dollars under control recognize that pricing of the things we buy go up on an annual basis but usually in single digit percentages. With Comcast, billing increases are well ahead of the increase from any other service provider except medical care.

To be specific I will use my own billing experience to demonstrate why I hope the Town Committee can help seniors to contain the increases we have all experienced in our months charges from Comcast.

**Service and Equipment Charges**

1. When a person has a service contract with Comcast, the equipment provided by Comcast is not included in the contractual agreement and the rental charge on those items can increase without warning. In my case, the cost of "phone equipment" was initially set at \$10.00 per month. I own my phones so I am not even sure what equipment is rented. I do know for certain that since my new contract went into effect last January, the cost of the "phone equipment rental" has increased to \$11.95 per month and there was not communication regarding this increase other than a higher number on my bill.
2. I am being charged \$5.00 per month right now for the Modem that Comcast provided. Without that unit, there could be no connection here for the Internet for the phones yet there is a separate charge for that modem and it does seem like just another opportunity to increase the monthly charge to me.
3. There are three digital "boxes" in my unit. The first box comes "free" but there is a charge for the other two boxes. That charge was \$6.95 in January and is now \$7.95.

**So my "fixed contract" bill has been increased by \$3.95 per month since January of 2010.** As I understand it, those charges can be additionally increased at any time, without apparent cause and without prior notification.

4. In January I "consolidated" with Comcast, which means that in addition to my Internet service and my Cable TV service, I added Comcast phone service. (I have submitted a separate document to identify all the problems that I have had with the phone service.) My monthly bill on a three-year "triple play" contract was to be \$119.99 for service. I believed that would mean I could count on \$119.99 for three years. I did understand that there would be a charge for "rental equipment" but I believed that rental charge was fixed along with the service.
5. Yesterday I learned that price is not firm and that increases have been scheduled to "kick-in". That aspect of my agreement with Comcast was simply not made clear. This service will go to \$134.99 in January of 2011 and to \$149.99 in January of 2012. In addition, if I opt out of this agreement, there is a \$75 charge.

#### **Senior Citizen Discount.**

With all of the charges for Comcast service escalating at a rate that far exceed "inflation", I am further aggravated to have determined that Comcast offers a "senior discount" of \$2.00 provided the individual finds out that such a discount exists and provided that their form is submitted and all required documents attached. In my case it three months before the discount was enacted and that is when I learned that the amount of discount was \$2.00. Few people living in my complex have applied for this discount even when there are aware it exists. Most feel the offering is tokenism in the extreme.

The senior citizen discount of \$2.00 appears in the contract the town has signed with Comcast. It would seem that there was not much attention paid to negotiating that discount.

#### **Cable Committee Questions and Requests:**

The Acton Cable Committee has a duty to protect the interests of Acton citizens when it comes to cable service and cable charges. We need your help with Comcast cost containment because of the following concerns:

1. The seniors who live on Audubon Hill do not have options when it comes to cable television service. The condominium complex does not permit satellite dishes to be installed. I have contacted Verizon to determine why they have not brought the FIOS to this area when it is available just one block away on Conant Street. Verizon has agreed to determine why the FIOS service is not available here and let me know.

2. The existing two-dollar "senior discount" is a pittance and not worth the effort required to prove eligibility. Surely the town Cable Committee has the ability to negotiate a "real discount" for its senior citizens. 10% would be a number that would certainly be helpful. Given that a new 10-year contract with Comcast is scheduled to go into effect on June 29, there is urgency to this request.
3. While the contract the town has negotiated with Comcast is not an exclusive contract, does the following wording regarding granting of additional licenses (page 14 of contract) effectively preclude other competitors from applying?

"In the event that the Licensee believes that any additional cable television licenses have been granted on terms and conditions **more favorable or less burdensome** than those contained in this Renewal License, the Licensee may request, in writing, that the Issuing Authority convene a public hearing on the issue...." Etc)

OK

Does that statement mean that the town would lose free Comcast services provided to the schools and public buildings if additional licenses are granted? If it does, then there is a significant disincentive for any other company wishing to obtain a cable TV license.