

Qwest keeps heat on steam

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Qwest Communications said Friday that while technicians continue to study the cause of a phone outage Jan. 26 on the North Shore, there are signs that heat under a Duluth street ruined its fiber optics line.

That explanation remains a puzzle for Duluth officials and the manager of the Duluth Steam Cooperative, who says there has been little or no contact with Qwest since the line break and Qwest's original explanation that it was caused by a steam pipe rupture. Manager Jerry Pelofske said there was no steam pipe problem.

The statement Friday was issued in a letter to Lake and Cook county commissioners, who have criticized the company for not having a backup line to provide service to the North Shore. John Stanoch, the Minnesota president for Qwest, wrote that when employees zeroed in on the problem at Second Avenue and Second Street in Duluth, they found a line "deformed due to what appeared to our crew to be heat damage." Stanoch said the line has been in place since 1987. When crews responded to the outage, "steam was escaping from two manholes." He wrote that the air temperature in the manhole was "significantly warmer than normal."

All of that is news to Pelofske. "I haven't seen or heard anything," he said Friday when made aware of Qwest's latest assertions. "No, we did not have a steam line break. We did not have a leak."

Pelofske said he would have his own crew "go and take a look" this week to see if anything is out of the norm. He said that shortly after the line failure, Duluth Steam workers were called out to locate steam pipes under the streets but that's the only communication it's had with Qwest.

Earlier in the week Jim Benning, the director of public works for Duluth, said there had been no contact with Qwest in the week since the line break.

Stanoch's letter did not address a larger question coming from commissioners, public safety officials and customers the past two weeks. They've been wondering why there wasn't a backup line available to reroute communications and get service up quickly. Qwest spokeswoman Joanna Hjemeland said that questions about redundancy are for a "conversation down the road." She said Qwest will sit down with county officials to discuss what was or wasn't said in the past, such as Lake County Sheriff Carey Johnson's assertion that he was in conversations with Qwest about supplying a redundant line to keep 911 service uninterrupted.

No date was set for a meeting with board members.

Undersheriff Jerry Norberg, in a letter to the Lake County board this week, said "It is painfully obvious that we were sold a bill of goods from Qwest."

The fiber optic line break happened just before 11 a.m. that Tuesday and service wasn't fully restored until around midnight. It affected customers from Two Harbors to Grand Portage who were left without internet, phone or cell coverage. Hjemeland said the actual time to repair the line wasn't out of the ordinary. "What's unusual is what caused it."

Public safety officials scrambled to find alternative ways to communicate, including two-way and ham radios.

Businesses complained about lost business in letters to commissioners in Lake and Cook counties and residents brought up fears of not getting help in case of a medical emergency.

There were even concerns raised about national security considering Cook County is adjacent to the international border with Canada.

Stanoch reiterated that the outage was "unusual" and that Qwest's analysis of what went wrong is ongoing, especially "because the city has disputed our preliminary assessment of the cause of this damage. We have asked local and out-of-state experts to examine the damaged fiber."

Hjemeland said she couldn't say whether Qwest had been consulting with the city of Duluth or Duluth Steam as part of its investigation.

Lake County Commissioner Paul Bergman has been sending Stanoch e-mails describing the public frustration over the outage and lack of a redundant line. He said the company had lobbyists in Washington, D.C., this week trying to tamp down efforts by Lake and Cook counties to install their own communication lines, which are dependent on federal funding.

The counties have assured residents that backup broadband lines would be in place. Bergman's most recent communication with Stanoch Thursday was terse in its assessment of Qwest. "I believe Qwest has no intention of upgrading phone service to Lake and Cook counties by the addition of redundant loops and will only repair the phone line that was broken. I believe they really don't care."

Hjemeland called an editorial in last week's Lake County News-Chronicle "very strong" and that people are being too "quick to make assumptions." The editorial demanded that Qwest be more open about the cause of the line break and explain the lack of a redundant line.

"People say things on all different sides, and we have to be careful," Hjemeland said.

"This is something that could come down to legal issues."