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Delegates criticize Comcast behavior

by [Jake Stump](#)

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CHARLESTON, W.Va.--Somebody who wandered into the House of Delegates chamber on Thursday might have thought they had stumbled upon an anti-cable commercial shoot for Dish Network or DirecTV.

Delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, ignited a fiery discussion against cable companies, particularly Comcast, by explaining that several constituents in her area no longer get West Virginia Public Broadcasting.

Some Comcast subscribers in the Morgantown area, as well as the Northern and Eastern Panhandles, recently lost West Virginia PBS when the cable company began carrying programming on a digital signal only.

That means customers without digital reception no longer get WNPB in the basic cable package.

Comcast has defended the move, saying it was agreed upon by the company and the Association of Public TV Stations.

But Fleischauer said she wants Comcast to return the channel to its basic tier.

"I pay a lot more for cable than what I get," she said. "They're a monopoly. I have no choice."

Morgantown City Council even endorsed a petition to bring the channel back for subscribers who lost it.

Comcast has stated it would offer a free digital box to customers for 12 months to pick up the channel, though lawmakers say it's a ploy because the company would charge subscribers for the equipment once a year is up.

Jaye Linnen, a spokeswoman for Comcast, said, "Comcast and West Virginia Public Broadcasting entered into a voluntary agreement to carry West Virginia PBS programming digitally. Comcast plans to honor the agreement."

By the same token, satellite television providers do not carry West Virginia PBS stations in those parts of the state.

Following Fleischauer's comments on the floor, Delegate Bonnie Brown, D-Kanawha, asked her colleague about Comcast's reputation for having terrible customer service.

Brown sits on the West Virginia Public Broadcasting board and said she's heard that Comcast's customer service is "hostile" and "less than consumer friendly."

Fleischauer replied that she could never get a Comcast official on the phone to address her concerns.

"They should be good corporate citizens if they want to operate in this state," she said.

Brown said officials in the Morgantown area are mostly focusing on the PBS debacle, though she is following the events.

The Charleston area doesn't have the same problem, as Suddenlink provides West Virginia PBS on its basic package.

"If it's a trend, we need to know what's going on," Brown said. "What concerns me is some of the e-mails I've gotten talking about the nastiness and hostility from Comcast. They tell their customers, 'We don't have to tell you anything,' or 'We're not going to do this or that.' "

Delegate Tim Ennis, D-Brooke, also weighed in on the issue, portraying himself, too, as a victim of Comcast.

Last year, Ennis requested a state investigation of the cable industry, which led to the creation of an interim committee to study the issue. The chairs of both the House and Senate Government Organization committees ended up sending a letter to the Federal Communications Commission outlining the need for an investigation, Ennis said.

The FCC regulates the cable companies, but Ennis said he believes that job should be left to the state's Public Service Commission.

"They should be treated just like any other utility," Ennis said. "They should have to get FCC approval on channel change lineups and rate increases.

Ennis' fight against cable companies began two years ago when Comcast removed channels such as Court TV (now truTV), CSPAN2, the Hallmark Channel and MSNBC from the expanded basic cable service to a more expensive format.

Ennis said he later lost the Game Show Network, Oxygen, Country Music Television and a host of other channels, yet his bill increased by \$5.

"They're even charging 50 cents now for the remote," Ennis said Thursday. "I'm serious."

When he questioned a Comcast representative on the reasons for eliminating channels and raising the fees, Ennis said the official told him, 'We do it because we can.'

"That infuriated me," Ennis said.

In 2004 and 2007, the American Customer Satisfaction Index survey found that Comcast had the worst customer satisfaction rating of any company or government agency in the country. An ACSI analysis points out that although customer service satisfaction has dropped over the years, the company's revenue has increased. It explains, "Such pricing power usually comes with some level of monopoly protection and most cable companies have little competition at the local level. This also means that a cable company can do well financially even though its customers are not particularly satisfied."

J.D. Power and Associates also published an annual customer satisfaction survey in October 2008 for the nation's top 10 largest cable and satellite television providers. Comcast scored in the bottom five for each region of the United States.

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