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The Maine School and Library Network

By Tom Welch

In May 1995, the Maine Public Utilities Commission decided that New England Telephone Company (part of NYNEX, later part of Verizon, and now owned by Fair Point) should reduce its rates by about \$10,000,000 per year (Maine PUC 1995). As is always the case when a regulatory commission is making a decision about how to divide a pie of this kind (or for that matter, when considering how to distribute the pain of a rate increase), the commission had received a great deal of advice from those who hoped to benefit. One option suggested by some was to provide an across the board reduction to customers. With more than 500,000 New England Telephone customers, this would have amounted to something under \$20 per year. Another was to reduce Maine's high in-state toll rates. Yet another would be to apply one of the typically arcane "rate design" tools used by regulators when setting rates such as "inverse elasticity pricing," whereby those who have the least choice in what they buy pay the most.

During the case, however, another possibility emerged. By the early 1990s, people in the business of understanding, organizing, and conveying information—especially teachers and librarians—began to focus on the pedagogic, social, and economic potential of electronic access to remotely stored data (i.e., what became the Internet). With a keen appreciation for the value of funding sources, a characteristic shared by all financially starved and undervalued institutions, the school and library community began to make the case

at the commission for funding a program that would provide every citizen in Maine with access—in the "kiosk"-like setting of schools and libraries—to the Internet. Moreover, the library community in particular complained, with considerable justification, that Maine's high in-state toll rates created a barrier to public access to the electronic information data bases that were then just coming online.

For example, in terms that could as easily be used today, Fenwick Fowler of Western Maine Community Action urged: "As we look to the future, it will be critical for our libraries to provide affordable access to the information superhighway and other technologies, especially here in the rural western mountains region of Maine."¹

The Maine Department of Education weighed in with similar concerns:

Two key issues with regard to the development and implementation of a statewide telecommunications infrastructure are accessibility and equity.... If Maine schools are to offer equal opportunities to all students in all parts of Maine and remain competitive with schools in other states, they must be able to obtain access to on-line information services at rates that are affordable.²

The testimony from the school and library community was eloquent and persuasive. After all, the chance to put Maine in the forefront of Internet access was singularly attractive as a way to ameliorate the state's inescapable relative isolation (it is, after all, the only state in the Union that borders only one other state). What was less clear was whether it was the task of the Maine PUC, as opposed, for example, to the legislature, to make a decision to fund such a program or to otherwise single out this constituency.

The commission's own explanation of the basis for its authority was, to put it politely, cryptic in the extreme. In giving its reason for allocating \$4 million of what would otherwise have been a rate reduction to an as yet unspecified program to support services for data access to schools and libraries, the commission said only that "[w]e do this in the belief that significant benefits to the public may be realized by providing limited support for additional access to information networks and services" (Maine PUC 1995: 58).

There was, however, no clear legislative authority for “diverting” funds collected from other telephone service users to the school and library community. Happily, with the passage of P.L. 1995, ch.631 (now codified in 35-A M.R.S.A. § 7104-B), the legislature removed any doubt concerning the commission’s authority to implement the Maine School and Library Network (MSLN), and with few modifications, the program continues today. Though, it must be added, the members of the legislative committee considering the bill had a few things to say to that chairman about respecting the divisions of authority between elected officials and appointed bureaucrats.



Bangor Public Library computer users.

The MSLN was the first of its kind in the nation, and it is probably not a coincidence that the federal “e-rate,” which provides discounts for telecommunications services to schools, libraries and health care facilities, was successfully championed by Senator Snowe of Maine. Over the years the available speeds for the free connections have improved (the initial speeds of 56kbps Frame Relay service today seems quaint; now the system runs at 10 Mbps at a minimum for all MSLN sites), but the fundamental vision guiding the program has remained constant: in every community in Maine that has a school, every student and teacher has access at no cost to (now high

speed) Internet access, and in every community with a library—which in Maine is essentially every community—there are almost 1,000 schools and libraries participating in the program, every citizen has the same opportunity.

WHAT IS HAPPENING VIA MSLN TODAY?

Economic recovery in Maine is aided by the partnership between the Maine State Library and the Maine Department of Labor and coordination of efforts with Career Center staff for courses offered in libraries related to job searching, crossover skills, using social media, and interviewing skills. The subscription to LearningExpress Library and Popular Software tutorials offers an online component for job seekers to improve or learn new skills on their own at libraries and at home. Career Centers promote the use of this product to increase job seekers’ skills and for writing resumes and cover letters. This online tool is available to job seekers in public libraries, in Career Centers, and from home with a free login.

The Volunteer Lawyers Project for the “Lawyers in Libraries” initiative allows lawyers to provide services to rural, low-income Maine citizens through collaboration with libraries and the use of videoconferencing technology. As described by Justice Andrew Mead elsewhere in this issue, the group has undertaken a partnership with public libraries to present legal clinics at the libraries, which are broadcast to locations throughout the state via videoconferencing. During 2013, they hope to add desktop-computer conferencing between lawyers and individuals at remote locations.

In Maine schools, the use of the Internet to improve education is ubiquitous. Students and teachers not only seek information and content online, but they are creating and publishing new content online. Rural schools can now close distances and create collaborations that previously would have never existed. For example, students in the one- and two-room schools on Cliff, Frenchboro, Isle au Haut, the Cranberry Islands, Matinicus, and Monhegan islands attend school together via videoconference through the Outer Island Teaching and Learning Collaborative (<http://outerislandstlc.org>).

Maine leads the nation with its 1:1 computer program, the Maine Learning Technology Initiative (MLTI). Governor [now U.S. Senator] Angus King created MLTI in 2002 and built upon the foundation of MSLN. Today, every 7th and 8th grade student and half of all high school students in Maine are provided a personal laptop computer by MLTI. Students and teachers leverage the high-speed access to the Internet and are on the forefront of the transition from traditional print materials to digital. These efforts are paying dividends for Maine's students and their families as an article by Noel Gallagher in the January 13, 2013, *Portland Press Herald* reports that Maine students are less likely to require remedial courses than students in other states.

With the current push for in-home broadband availability, it might seem that the MSLN is an anachronism. Everyone, it seems, has a computer or some other device that has access to the information “cloud.” I disagree with this suggestion, however, or at the very least would argue that if it is an anachronism, it is one we should preserve. “Bricks and mortar” libraries and schools are among the few remaining physical places in our society where members of a local community can meet informally, can seek information without making a financial commitment, and can draw people into our revitalizing community centers. Moreover, while making affordable broadband connections ubiquitous is a worthy goal, in Maine there will always be those who are too remote, or too poor, or who choose for their own reasons not to own or rent their own personal link to the Internet. In all my frequent visits to libraries and schools scattered throughout Maine, I have rarely seen the computers sitting idle; it is as common to see people waiting for a free terminal to be come available. The free kiosks connecting to MSLN—providing, as they do, inconceivably more information than those sidewalk kiosks and their posters giving the latest news, but doing so at no more cost to the reader—ensure that all Maine citizens and all Maine students can participate to the extent they choose in the vast and interconnected universe of information. 🐟

ENDNOTES

1. Letter dated December 13, 1994, from Fenwick Fowler to Charles Jacobs (submitted in Dockets 94-123 and 94-254).
2. Letter from Leo Martin, Commissioner, Department of Education, to Charles Jacobs, December 12, 1994 (filed in Dockets 94-123 and 94-254).

REFERENCES

Maine PUC. 1995. Pease v. New England Telephone and Telegraph Company, Docket No. 94-254. (Maine P.U.C., May 15, 1995).

Mead, Andrew. 2013. “‘Lawyers in Libraries’: A New Approach to Access to Justice in Maine.” *Maine Policy Review* 22(1): 94-95.



Tom Welch was appointed to the Maine Public Utilities Commission as chair in 2011, a position in which he had previously served from 1993 to 2005. Between his commission appointments, Welch worked for PJM Interconnection, a

Pennsylvania-based regional transmission organization, and for five years was an attorney at Pierce Atwood, LLP, in Portland, Maine.