Bowie Seniors Computer Club Minutes for May 20, 2010

Carl Bulger presided.

Approximately 30 – 32 people attended, four of whom were new.

Presentation:
Verizon sent two representatives to answer our questions regarding their services:

Jason L. Groves, Verizon Assistant Vice-President of Government Affairs in Annapolis

Jeffory D. McKay, FiOS Service Mgr./NSG Jeff manages 17 service technicians.
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We asked mostly technical and cost questions. Two or three members are still using dial-up, a few are using DSL, many are using cable access to TV, phone, and/or internet (most of them via Comcast) and many are using Verizon's FiOS (Fiber Optic Service) for TV, telephone, and/or internet.

Everybody with telephone landlines (copper, cable, or fiber optics) should be able to access the internet via dial-up using any of numerous Internet Service Providers (ISPs) who offer it. As we all know, dial-up is slow (max. speed 53 Kbits/sec.) Downloads seem to take forever. While you're online you can't make or receive phone calls on that line.

Many landline telephone providers offer DSL (Digital Service Line) service over copper landlines within about 3 miles of their switching facility. Beyond 3 miles the signal is too weak and noisy. Those that can receive the DSL signal and subscribe to it, can make and receive telephone calls at the same time as they are using the internet. The DSL signal is a high frequency which can be filtered out of the lower frequency telephone conversation. The service provider will provide the filter(s) which simply plug into the line between the wall outlet and the telephone. Like dial-up, DSL transmission speeds are quite variable. They slow down during high usage periods.

Broadband communication over the internet in the U.S. is slow compared to many other developed countries. We are slowly improving in quality and transmission speed relative to cost. Of the technologies available, fiber optic service is capable of the highest speeds and digital quality. Those of us who dealt with slow and noisy internet connections for a long time were exhilarated when we finally got connected to a high speed cable or fiber optic service.

It was in Verizon's business interests to get rid of their copper lines and substitute fiber optic lines. The copper lines were getting old, were two slow and noisy, required a lot of maintenance, attenuated the signal too much, and couldn't carry as much data simultaneously. Coaxial cables, such as Comcast uses, can carry much more data further and faster than twisted twin copper telephone wires, but fiber optic cable far outstrips coaxial cable in performance. Satellite service suffers from a 2-4 second transmission delay between ground and satellite. Standard and High Definition TV signals are also broadcast over the air. If you have a good antenna and a TV that can receive and display digital signals, you can probably receive most or all of the network channels. If it is also a High Definition Digital TV, you should be able to receive the high definition signals over the air. If your TV is the old analog type, it will require an analog-to-digital converter.

Since it is impractical to rewire old houses with fiber optic cable, the fiber optic service providers usually run the fiber optic cable up to a box on the outside of the house which is connected to another box just inside the house, often in the garage, utility room, basement, or a closet. The box inside the house has connectors for TV cables, internet cables, and telephone cables. It also has a small storage battery that will allow you to make and receive about four hours of telephone calls in case of a power failure. After that you'd better have a cell phone (and you still may not be able to make calls if the local cell phone tower has also lost power).

If you contract with Verizon for fiber optic service, you will be at the mercy of the technician doing the installing. We asked Groves and McKay if Verizon had a

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policy regarding how much the technician would do inside the house. Groves had no answer. McKay, who manages and supervises 17 technicians, said their policy is to "make the customer happy." He also mentioned that the technician is not required to do anything that is hazardous. He said the technician may go up in the attic if there is a large, safe, convenient access. In my case, it was a 60-degree day. The technician went up there and exchanged the signal splitter that Comcast (actually Prime Cable at that time) had installed in the 1980's. I had replaced Comcast's cables with new coaxial cables but I hadn't replaced the signal splitter which splits the TV signal into two separate cables going to two TV sets. I had hardwired my internet connections. If I had not done that, they would have installed a wireless transmitter in the garage where the box came through the wall.

The reason I asked what Verizon's policy was regarding installation is that my experience was good. It was a cool day, so it wasn't too hot in the attic. I had pre-wired the TV and internet cables. And there was convenient access in the garage for installation of the box.

My 80-year-old neighbors only ordered TV and telephone service. The lady installer complained that she had a bad back. When she installed the cable to the TV in the second floor bedroom, she merely stapled the cable to the outside siding of the house four feet off the ground. It was unsightly and the staples damaged the asbestos shingle siding. Verizon later sent another installer who moved the horizontal portion of the cable below the lowest siding shingle where it was not visible. The vertical portion of the cable was nestled next to the corner trim behind the downspout where it also was not visible.

Many of us questioned Verizon about the wisdom of purchasing FiOS services only to have Verizon hook us up to our old copper telephone wires and our old Comcast TV cables once they were inside the garage and then broadcast the internet signal over air from a wireless transmitter in the garage. Their response was that it was up to us to upgrade the wiring and connections in the house if we wished, but these would have a small effect on the signal.

Verizon offers four different digital set top boxes for TVs. You can choose to just receive ordinary digital signals. Or you can choose a set top box that will receive high definition digital signals. The more expensive boxes also contain a digital video recorder (DVR) which will allow you to record a program and watch it on any TV having the equivalent type of set top box. You can record one or two programs, and watch a third simultaneously. You can program the DVRs using your Verizon cell phone if you also have that service. Of course, when you are home, you might as well do it with the remote control that Verizon gives you.