



County of Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors

Agenda Item Submittal

From: Board of Supervisors - Second District

Subject: Opposition to Assembly Bill 470

Meeting Date: April 8, 2025

Formal Title: Direct the Board Chair to write a letter of opposition to the author of Assembly Bill 470, legislation that would allow phone companies to discontinue landline service with limited oversight, and take related actions

Recommended Actions

Direct the Board Chair to write a letter opposing Assembly Bill 470 to the bill's author, Assemblymember Tina McKinnor, and to share the letter with the legislative committee scheduled to hear the bill, and the County's legislative delegation.

Executive Summary

Assembly Bill (AB) 470 would allow telephone companies like AT&T to withdraw from providing basic landline service in certain areas with little oversight. In high fire-risk communities like ours, where residents frequently experience power outages and cell service gaps, this bill puts public safety at risk. Many residents, including seniors and medically vulnerable individuals, still rely on traditional landlines, especially during emergencies. The County should oppose AB 470 unless it includes strong, enforceable protections for rural and high-risk areas.

Discussion

AB 470 would allow phone companies to walk away from their Carrier of Last Resort (COLR) obligations in certain areas by simply notifying the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC). These obligations exist to ensure that every resident, regardless of location, has access to basic telephone service, including the ability to call 9-1-1 and receive emergency alerts.

The bill assumes that wireless and internet-based phone services are widely available and reliable enough to replace landlines. But in Santa Cruz County, that's not always the case. In many of our rural and mountain communities, cell coverage is spotty, broadband isn't consistent, and power outages are a regular part of life. When the power goes out or fire conditions cut off access, copper landlines often remain the only reliable way to reach help. That's not just a convenience—it's a lifeline, especially for seniors and residents with disabilities who may not have mobile phones or know how to use them in an emergency.

A similar bill—AB 970—was introduced last year by the same author, but it failed passage. At the same time, AT&T submitted a request to the CPUC in 2023 asking to be released from its COLR responsibilities. The Commission rejected that request in 2024, noting the risk to public safety and access, particularly in areas with few or no viable alternatives.

In February 2024, the Board of Supervisors formally opposed AT&T's attempt to end landline service. This action made clear that without a proven, reliable replacement, AB 470 would allow phone companies to walk away from their Carrier of Last Resort

(COLR) obligations in certain areas by simply notifying the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC). These obligations exist to ensure that every resident, regardless of location, has access to basic telephone service, including the ability to call 9-1-1 and receive emergency alerts.

Despite past rejection, AT&T has continued to push for legislative changes. AB 470 reflects a shift from a regulatory process, like the one handled by the CPUC, to a looser framework where companies define “coverage” themselves and move ahead without full state review.

While the bill includes a “customer challenge” process for residents who believe they lack alternatives, the burden falls on individuals—many of whom may not even know this process exists or may not have the tools to navigate it. The criteria for what qualifies as an “alternative voice service” are also broad enough to raise serious questions about reliability in real-world conditions.

Modernizing communications infrastructure is important, and long overdue in some areas. But until we can guarantee that every household—especially in fire-prone, rural, and underserved communities—has access to voice services that work when it matters most, protections like COLR need to stay in place.

Financial Impact

The recommended action has no financial impact.

Strategic Initiatives

Operational Plan - Comprehensive Health & Safety

Submitted By:

Kimberly De Serpa, Second District Supervisor

Recommended By:

Carlos J. Palacios, County Administrative Officer

Artificial Intelligence Acknowledgment:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) did not significantly contribute to the development of this agenda item.