

Statehouse sidelights . . .

Pay phone rate raise recalls past favors

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Idaho readers likely scanned with lifted eyebrows a news story a week ago that the Idaho Public Utilities Commission had given Mountain Bell permission to charge 25 cents for pay phone calls, five cents more than the phone company asked for.

It's a rarity with the IPUC, which has finally become an agency representing the consumers after many years considered little more than a pawn for public utilities and big corporations.

Since Gov. Cecil D. Andrus became governor, eight years ago, the IPUC has required public utilities to fully justify their application for rate increases. More often than not, it has denied or reduced the requests.

Even now such public utilities as the Idaho Power Co. and the Utah Power & Light Co. have had to fight relentlessly to obtain increases, in most cases being rejected or rates reduced.

Thus, the IPUC's alacrity to go even beyond the Mountain Bell requests is most amazing.

It's no surprise for Commissioner Ralph Wickburg to vote for the increase because his long record as a Republican appointee shows he has favored rate hikes consistently.

The new commissioner, Perry Swisher, certainly a friend of the people, also favored the hike. However, his reason that a pay phone user would be more likely to have a quarter in his pocket than two dimes appears superficial and irrelevant.

Even the commission's president, Conley Ward, disagreed with the 25 cent raise and believed the 20 cent charge was adequate to cover costs of covering the dial-tone-first service.

It must be noted that in many parts of the country, pay phones require a minimum of 20 cents and it can be expected those still at a dime will soon be increased.

Mountain Bell incurred the warm feeling of the IPUC because it was the only public utility which endorsed the reappointment of fiery Robert Lenaghan to the IPUC last January.

All 19 Senate Republicans refused to confirm the appointment for obvious political reasons, and the 16 Senate Democrats voted in favor.

The Senate Republicans lost considerable credibility by this action and it was a major factor in creating partisan disharmony and legislative delays for the remainder of the 1979 session.

When Gov. John V. Evans then appointed Swisher to replace Lenaghan, the Senate Republicans were in such a rush to redeem themselves that they took only a day to confirm the appointment unanimously in the Senate State Affairs Committee and then the full Senate. It was the speediest action ever on a major appointment.

This is not to say the IPUC approved the Mountain Bell application beyond its request because of its gratefulness to Mountain Bell — but that certainly didn't hurt.

The phone company's spokesman, Herb Carlson, pointed out the company will need to raise \$750,000 to make the conversion, and even with the 25 cent raise, the money will not be easy to get. He also added the company provided the IPUC with testimony on what could be done if the rate was increased to a quarter. Apparently it impressed the commissioners.

Mountain Bell stood alone then but it apparently was smart politics.



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Losing cause

BOISE — This shows Robert Lenaghan as he pleaded before the Senate State Affairs Committee for re-appointment to the Idaho Public Utilities Committee. The committee recommended rejection 6-5 and the full Senate defeated the confirmation a day later 19-16 on a straight party line vote with all Republicans in opposition. A Lewiston newspaperman, Perry Swisher, was later unanimously confirmed to replace him.