

Triangle residents push for toll-free telephone system

By LAURA DIGIANO
Assistant City Editor

Local residents are joining forces in the Triangle area to have a toll-free telephone system linking Orange, Durham and Wake counties.

Over 800 residents of the Bingham Township in Orange County have signed a petition to the N.C. Utilities Commission calling for a toll-free regional calling system.

Gregory Smith, a Bingham resident who presented the petition to the Utilities Commission two weeks ago, said the main problem was that residents are serviced by three separate telephone companies, and often must make long distance phone calls just to call a neighbor.

A petition was circulated when the residents realized the Bingham and Mebane townships were not included in a toll-free calling system in the Durham, Raleigh and Chapel Hill

area, Smith said.

N.C. Rep. Joe Hackney, D-Orange, has also sent a letter to the Utilities Commission to voice his support for the Bingham residents, Smith said.

"Not only are residents linked through their occupations to Chapel Hill, Durham and Raleigh," Smith said, "but most of the time we pick up the phone to call churches, schools — even the fire department — it is a long-distance number."

"Having to call long-distance is an inconvenience and a financial burden," Smith said. He said his own telephone expenses for last month were \$150.

Many opponents of a regional toll-free system argue that there is not enough support from customers other than businesses, Smith said.

"This issue cuts across all socioeconomic strata," he said. "All you

need to do is look at the residents of Bingham to know that we are not in the minority."

The estimated extra cost per resident for consolidated telephone service in the Triangle is about \$2.50. "All of the citizens that signed our petition were aware of and supported this extra charge," Smith said.

"The Triangle area is growing," he said. "But the basic infrastructure required for organized growth includes telephone service that is accessible and toll-free."

Utilities Commission attorney Daniel Long said that since the commission began its hearings on a toll-free system for the Triangle area last fall, several other organizations have voiced support for the proposal.

"We have heard from a fair number of residents who are mostly in favor of the project, and we have received several petitions such as the one from

Bingham," Long said. "The Triangle J Council of Governments and several telephone companies have also made presentations to the commission."

"Public support and interest in the proposal obviously does have an effect on the commission's deliberations," he said. "The commission looks to public sentiment when making decisions like this."

Hugh Geringer, an engineer with the Communications Division of the public staff that represents consumers to the Utilities Commission, said growth and development in the Triangle area is a key issue.

The Triangle J Council of Governments initiated the plans for a toll-free calling region, Geringer said.

"The council is making the case that a toll-free calling system would be a boost to further development in the area," he said. "They envision this area to be similar to a scattered metropolitan area such as Atlanta, which has a form of toll-free service."

The council brought in nearly 40 witnesses from local government agencies, area universities and large businesses in Research Triangle Park to voice support for the system, Geringer said.

Officials from Southern Bell, GTE and other smaller telephone companies have filed their own proposals for marketing a toll-free system, Geringer said.

"Most solutions presented by the telephone companies use optional or measured services rather than the flat rate, non-optional services called for by the Triangle J Council," he said.

Steve Toler, public affairs manager for GTE South, said his company has received positive feedback from the Triangle J Council for their proposal.

"Triangle J has told us that our proposal most closely meets their needs and interests," Toler said.

GTE's plan would provide an 80 percent discount for calls made between Chapel Hill, Durham and Raleigh for those customers who choose to pay an additional monthly fee, Toler said. The plan would also eliminate the need to dial one before the number when calling between the three cities.

The plan is appealing because it provides customers with an option of

whether or not to have the long-distance discount, he said.

"While there is an important group of customers that make frequent calls between Chapel Hill, Raleigh and Durham, it is a small group," Toler said.

GTE officials have provided testimony to the Utilities Commission in favor of their plan since November 1987, Toler said. "But since we are regulated by the commission, we must wait until a recommendation is made."

West Franklin Street merchants band together to help business

By JEANNA BAXTER
Staff Writer

Merchants on West Franklin Street have formed an ad hoc association to promote that part of town and to address common problems, said Sue Koenigshofer, managing partner of The Courtyard shopping complex.

"We want to raise awareness of the many different types of shops down here," Koenigshofer said.

The merchants are also working with the town to get more metered parking and better signs along the U.S. 15-501 bypass, she said. Visitors are not aware they can reach Franklin Street via Merritt Mill Road as well as by the UNC campus.

Advertising together has allowed the merchants to purchase larger advertisements at a better rate, Koenigshofer said. The merchants are advertising in newspapers and on the radio.

Robert Humphreys, manager of Chapel Hill Cleaners at 422 W. Franklin St., said, "It's a positive move when neighbors can work together toward a common end, and promotion of the area as a whole is a worthwhile common end."

Berkeley Grimball, owner of Grim-

ball and Stokes Jewelers, said, "Cooperative advertising has done a lot to make people more conscious that the west end is here. As people become aware of this, traffic will continue to increase."

Laura McLean, manager of Ham's Restaurant, said her business has only contributed to one ad because most of the merchants cater to an older clientele, and they cater to the students and younger adults. But the better advertising has helped the whole area, she said.

Koenigshofer said the association includes merchants of the west end of Franklin and Rosemary streets from Ham's Restaurant to Crook's Corner, and other connecting streets. The merchants organized in November and worked hard to advertise right before Christmas, Koenigshofer said.

She said the merchants she has talked to said business was very successful at Christmas. Sales at The Courtyard were up 12 percent to 13 percent from the previous year, while Triangle area sales were up only 5 percent to 6 percent.

"I think the joint ads contributed to the increase," Koenigshofer said. "People learned about the selections

available down there."

Humphreys said that although he has not seen any direct increase in business yet, anything that helps the area will ultimately help Chapel Hill Cleaners.

"This area has a mix of specialty stores that aren't available anywhere else in town, and their uniqueness deserves promotion," he said.

Grimball said West Franklin Street has become a more interesting place to shop and browse. The west end offers a great deal of variety to customers, he said.

Koenigshofer said there are 55 businesses on the association's mailing list and five to 15 active members.

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