

Concerns About the Proposed Orange Beach Fiber-Hood Project

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Orange Beach needs an upgrade, proposing high-speed Internet to our homes, but we have bridges to cross.

Let's start with my first introduction to the signup process. Century Link's Fiber-Hood Website has no contact form or email to submit written questions before I signup, only a telephone number: 800-743-2602. Does the city have access to our partner's logs, as if residents were calling City Hall?

The Offer-Details Disclaimer states: "CenturyLink may change, cancel, or substitute offers and services, or vary them by service area, at its sole discretion without notice," according to the web site,

http://www.centurylink.com/home/fiberhood/products/productOffer_details.html.

Does this mean CenturyLink can sell their Orange Beach Fiber Internet business without prior approval of the city, leaving us in the lurch with an unknown vendor? The above does not sound like the business rhetoric I've heard in the Council Chambers, clearly explaining why I wanted to submit written questions to the Fiber-Hood Web Site, but that option is not available.

Does the offer for 100 Mbps service mean 100 Mbps upload and download (full-duplex) for \$60 per month without a bandwidth cap? Vendors sometimes mask their true speed by advertising 100 Mbps circuits, resulting in 100 Mbps download and 10 Mbps upload, choking the resident with a house full of guests on game-day, trying to upload media to Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Reddit and YouTube at the same time, perhaps it is better to offer a true 20 Mbps upload and download for \$60 per month.

Does CenturyLink's Orange Beach Fiber Internet Project have a weekly-newsletter, giving residents a chance to see how the project is progressing, perhaps influencing their decision to put a credit card on file?

Obviously, the people who live in Orange Beach are not stupid. They are more tech-capable than they are given credit for, possibly asking well-researched questions at a Town Hall, hoping the presenters are prepared with answers or prepared to be embarrassed.

Embarrassment aside, our residents deserve the very best information and transparency for a project that will alter the demographic landscape of Orange Beach forever, possibly creating a boom in real estate prices.

Fiber provides opportunities for affluent-young millennials to move here, attracted by fast connectivity, the climate, and because it is safe. High-speed Internet is the millennials' food-and-drink, working from home, schooling their children online, engaging in social media, and adjusting their subscription deliveries over the Internet.

Fiber-to-the-home has an added bonus, raising property values. "High-speed fiber broadband service, with 1 Gbps download speeds, can add more than \$5,400 to the value of an average U.S. Home", according to a study commissioned by the Fiber to the Home Council Americas (FTTH).

Concerns About the Proposed Orange Beach Fiber-Hood Project

CenturyLink's Orange Beach Fiber plan is solid, limiting the financial risk of both partners, tying the trigger pull to the number of subscribers. The city is divided into seven districts where each neighborhood's build-out relies on 33% participation, voted on by a \$25 per subscriber fee paid online. The fee is refundable without interest if the subscription limit is not met, according to the project's web site.

We also need a plan, describing how we will respond to customer-service complaints, determining who is responsible, CenturyLink or the City of Orange Beach. I am cynical, imagining one blaming the other in the midst of a crisis. For example, a fiber switch is underwater during a flood, and a family is not getting calls from their Internet phones.

People will always complain to City Hall. You cannot change that. Having a pre-launch customer-service plan gives residents confidence in the City's ability to manage CenturyLink.

We need to look at key-contractual issues or small print. The Offer-Details Disclaimer affects everyone in the neighborhoods who sign up.

"Depending on services you select, these CenturyLink surcharges apply: Internet/Broadband Cost Recovery Fee; Prism Local Broadcast Surcharge; Prism Sports Network Surcharge; Non-Telecom Services Surcharge; and additional surcharges. These are neither taxes nor required by law, but set by CenturyLink and may change. Additional taxes and fees will apply and appear on your monthly bill," according to the project's web site.

I want to avoid finger pointing in the Council Chambers with people shouting, "You got me into this." Conflict scenarios in our town do not bear thinking about.

Orange Beach's name is branded all over CenturyLink's Internet product, but the City may have no influence over how the brand interacts with its constituents. To whom should a resident turn, seeking satisfaction, during a dispute, the City of Orange Beach or CenturyLink?

Some argue against the proposed plan, citing existing gigabit service. "Orange Beach is one of 15 communities in Baldwin County where Mediacom offers 1-Gig Internet speeds," said Jason Clabo, Mediacom's Director of Area Operations for Alabama. "Our company committed to a \$1 billion private financial investment and a swift rollout to make gigabit broadband widely available to nearly every home and business within reach of our network, including 71 communities in Alabama."

Others suggest we fund this utility ourselves, emulating the City of Sylacauga, Alabama, having set precedent, funding our own Sewer Plant, knowing that a well-run utility is a cash-cow. Thereby keeping management in house, expanding Public Works to encompass fiber Internet, hiring professionals to get the job done right. It is a huge-initial investment, paying dividends through ownership over the next 50 years.

I fully support the principal of fiber-to-the-home. It will make our lives better. Asking questions makes it possible for my neighbors and me to enter into this contract with our eyes wide open, encouraging the development of a solutions-based dialogue.

The primary objective is for Orange Beach to be seen to be administering exceptional Internet service for its residents, their children and grandchildren, bringing reliable connectivity to the neighborhoods, enhancing our quality-of-life, bolstering property values, simultaneously keeping the monthly price affordable for families. Together, these are the bridges we need to cross.

ENDS.