

# Bush telecommunications service to expand

*GCI promises to sharpen  
phone call quality and more*

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GCI has announced plans to expand its telecommunications services to rural Alaska. Company officials told reporters at a June 22 briefing that the firm will deploy new technology in a demonstration project involving up to 50 sites, including 6 regional hubs.

"It will improve the plain old phone call," said General Manager G. Wilson Hughes. He said the project will improve fax and data transmission to sites currently receiving those services, and introduce the capability to new communities. "We've been testing this equipment for the last year. (It's) very cost effective and innovative. It will be a much faster, cleaner process."

A key component of GCI's proposal is the provision of "telemedicine" services, designed to allow village health clinics and regional medical personnel to

consult by teleconference with specialists in urban areas to reduce the need for patient travel and cut health care costs. Distance education will also be available to communities on the network.

Company officials said a combination of factors prompted the firm to seek permission from the Federal Communications Commission and the Alaska Public Utilities Commission to launch the service. They suggested the earth station technology introduced by rival Alascom in the 1970s is becoming obsolete, and that regulators are less resistant to allowing competition in the rural market. GCI attributes this shift in part to a perception that phone service in the state's urban areas has not suffered since competition was introduced a decade ago.

GCI's announcement follows on other recent developments in Alaska telecommunications. Alascom, successor to the old-

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time monopolies of RCA and then Comsat, is leaving the market, while international giant AT&T is preparing to enter.

Hughes also cited the growth and maturing of the rural market as a factor in the firm's decision.

"It will lower the cost of doing business in rural Alaska. The consumer is the winner in the long run," he said.

According to Richard Dowling, senior vice president for corporate development, GCI will build its new network around six regional hubs, where it is already allowed to provide long-distance phone service: King Salmon, Dillingham, Bethel, Nome, Kotzebue and Barrow. The remaining sites which have yet to be picked will be selected on the basis of several criteria, including the concentration and expressions of interest on the part of institutional users such as regional health corporations, and potential profitability for GCI.

"We want to deploy in contiguous regions (for greater efficiency)," said Dowling, rather than selecting villages one by one.

According to Dana Tindall, senior vice president for regulatory affairs, continuing prohibition of competition in rural long distance phone service is hampering the state's progress in telecommunications and business. She said under the current arrangements, rural Alaska is the most highly subsidized but most poorly served region in the country, and called on both regulators and the State of Alaska to reexamine their long-held opposition to rural competition.

Dowling told reporters that GCI has offered to provide AT&T with a rural network under contract.

"We're more focused (than AT&T)," Dowling said. We are way down the learning curve and deployed. I think they've been favorable.

Meanwhile, at the Alaska Public Utilities Commission, a commissioner fired by Gov. Tony Knowles continues to refuse to clean out his desk, even as his replacement has been given temporary office space until the issue is resolved in court. There is no indication if the controversy will affect the outcome of GCI's filing.

A fact sheet provided by GCI says the new equipment is designed to withstand extremely harsh weather conditions ranging from minus 60 degrees Fahrenheit to 100 degrees above, be left unattended for long periods of time and operate with unreliable power sources. A complete rural telecommunications system can be broken down and carried in the cargo bay of a Cessna Caravan or similar aircraft, and can be assembled using local materials for its foundation. In case of power failure, batteries will operate for up to eight hours. All electronic components are contained on five "bricks." If a malfunction occurs, a technician replaces a brick, without having to perform field diagnostics.