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Pennsylvania will investigate Verizon Communications Inc.'s upkeep of its aging copper phone lines, which still serve large areas of the state, according to a recent filing with the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission.

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Administrative Law Judge Joel H. Cheskis has scheduled the first hearing for March 18 in Harrisburg. Cheskis will seek information on the copper network and then make a recommendation to the commission,

PUC spokesman Nils Hagen-Frederiksen said.

The Communications Workers of America, which represents thousands of Pennsylvania linemen and customer service representatives, asked for the probe into sagging and spliced copper phone lines last October, submitting to the PUC dozens of photos that it claimed were evidence of shoddy maintenance. The images included utility poles dangling above the ground. Verizon provides phone and Internet services with two different technologies, traditional copper and newer fiber-optics, branded as FiOS.

Critics say the telecom giant has neglected copper as it invests billions of dollars into FiOS. Verizon says it maintains its copper network and responded to the CWA's petition in November by calling it a "fishing expedition in search of headlines and publicity to be exploited in labor contract discussions." The CWA has been working without a contract with Verizon since Aug. 1.

Verizon asked the PUC to dismiss the petition. Company spokesman Ray McConville said on Monday that the company had no comment on the Pennsylvania case. Ed

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Mooney, international vice president of CWA District 213 in Philadelphia, said last week, "I'm thrilled that they are finally paying attention to what we've been telling them." He said Verizon is not properly serving its customers.

In South Jersey, officials in 16 towns in Cumberland, Atlantic, Salem, and Gloucester Counties have complained in a filing to New Jersey regulators about the condition of Verizon's copper lines, saying that the company has concentrated FiOS in wealthier and more densely populated areas of the state. The biggest complaint by South Jersey residents is lost phone service during rainstorms and on damp days.

Verizon told New Jersey regulators that the South Jersey complaints were "a thinly veiled attempt to force Verizon to deploy fiber-optic facilities through these communities by creating a service crisis that does not exist." The telecom giant says that it has invested tens of millions of dollars to maintain copper lines in South Jersey. The service quality there was "consistently better than" state standards, McConville has said. The Board of Public Utilities is reviewing the petition and Verizon's response, an agency official said Monday.

McConville said Verizon had begun meeting with officials from the towns "to discuss their concerns and how we can work together moving forward." The telecom giant says that it has invested tens of millions of dollars to maintain copper lines in South Jersey. The service quality there was "consistently better than" state standards, McConville has said. The Board of Public Utilities is reviewing the petition and Verizon's response, an agency official said Monday. McConville said Verizon had begun meeting with officials from the towns "to discuss their concerns and how we can work together moving forward." – *Philadelphia Inquirer*

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Verizon Communications Inc. agreed to buy the fiber-optic network business from Carl Icahn's XO Communications LLC for \$1.8 billion, a deal the billionaire activist investor said didn't represent a good return on his investment.

XO, which Mr. Icahn took over after a 2002 bankruptcy, controls 20,000 miles of long-haul fiber routes and many more miles of short-haul lines that are used by corporations and other telecom companies to carry Internet data. The New York company also holds some high-frequency airwaves that are in bands designed for future 5G networks. Verizon will lease those airwaves and has the option to purchase them, which would give it all of XO's business.

The agreement bulks up Verizon's network of Internet pipes as the wireless provider is focusing much of its attention on nonphysical assets. The company agreed last year to buy AOL Inc. for \$4.4 billion, adding a new source of revenue from media and advertising. It also snapped up several Web technology providers to enhance its online video-delivery capabilities.

XO's assets could help Verizon shuttle data to and from its cellphone tower stations, a challenge that still vexes many wireless companies as subscribers demand high-speed connections wherever they go. It could also help Verizon fend off cable providers who are gaining more business-class broadband customers than incumbent phone companies. Over-investment during the 1990s forced many of XO's peers into bankruptcy in the decades that followed. Its remaining competitors include Cogent Communications Holdings Inc., Level 3 Communications Inc. and Zayo Group Holdings Inc.

Mr. Icahn began buying XO's senior debt in 2001, a year before the company filed for bankruptcy. He is now the chairman and sole shareholder. "Although this sale to Verizon does not represent a significant annualized return on our investment, we believe that in today's environment it does represent the best achievable outcome for the company's customers, employees and owner," Mr. Icahn said.

Mr. Icahn said Monday that he had to inject extra capital several times into XO as he worked with other stakeholders to “to keep XO alive.” Verizon said it expects operational synergies of more than \$1.5 billion from the transaction, which is subject to regulatory approval and is expected to close in the first half of 2017. – **Wall Street Journal**



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