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As Google Fiber expresses frustration over its prolonged deployment in Nashville, Comcast and AT&T point to another local service as a culprit for the delay: Nashville Electric Service.

At a Metro Council committee meeting last week, a Comcast official shared frustrations about the length of time the public utility takes to issue permits — a necessary step before poles can be made ready for additional lines. A lobbyist for Comcast said in a letter last week that NES delays have cost the company millions, damaged business relationships and resulted in lost customers.

"We do have some things, based on our observations and position in the marketplace, that we think can be worked on," said Comcast spokesman Andy Macke at the committee meeting on Aug. 15. "Timely approval of permits by NES would be one."

The delays raise questions about NES' ability to meet local business and consumer demand, both of which are increasingly dependent on speedy internet access.

Getting a permit from NES takes 90 to 100 days on average, Macke said, adding that Comcast's experience is different than Google's. After the permit is obtained, the process to make a pole ready for an additional line can still take an additional three months.

The issue stems from a dispute surrounding how providers access utility poles in Nashville. Google Fiber is pushing for a policy change that would allow it to install its gigabit speed internet service more quickly.

As it stands, each existing provider on a utility pole must adjust their cable to make room for a new provider. The process can take several months for each provider to make adjustments, and roads and sidewalks must close each time a provider moves its line.

A "One Touch Make Ready" Metro ordinance, up for second reading on Sept. 6, would allow an approved vendor to make changes in one session.

Nick Thompson, an NES official, said at the meeting last week that demand for pole attachment permits has escalated in recent years and it likely won't slow down anytime soon. NES, primarily a power provider, now receives applications for about 4,500 poles each year, nearly double the requests from 2013, and Google is seeking to attach to an additional 80,000 poles overall. NES brought on a new contractor about a year ago to help meet additional demand.

"We have struggled to keep up with our level of activity," he said. "Attachment activity has increased by incredible scale even before Google."

The utility responds in less than 90 to 100 days, Thompson said, later adding that NES's contractual obligation to Comcast is to process applications in 45 days.

Comcast recently has "flooded" NES with applications and the company has "exponentially" exceeded the number of poles it can apply for in a month, based on its contract, Thompson said. Once Comcast provides more information on its overall plans, NES can add more contractors to improve turnaround times.

of Thomas
Dooley

Comcast said the recent rounds of applications are for "continued network enhancements," but wouldn't to offer more specifics.

Resolution sought

Mayor Megan Barry called on NES and Comcast to settle issues surrounding delays.

"The Mayor is always interested in learning about ways to improve efficiencies within the government, and she encourages NES and Comcast to work together to identify possible efficiencies," Michael Cass, a spokesman for Barry, said in an emailed statement.

Last week, Barry called on NES CEO Decosta Jenkins and Metro Department of Law Director Jon Cooper to lead a meeting with Google, AT&T and Comcast to find a resolution.

Councilwoman Angie Henderson asked NES at the meeting if hiring more contractors could reduce delays and encouraged NES to improve its process.

"If you are 80 percent of poles and you are 90 to 100 days, it seems that you're a big stumbling block in the process," she said. "It looks like there needs to be more continuity and uniformity to the process."

AT&T's Tennessee President Joelle Phillips pointed to NES as part of the problem, but stopped short of criticizing the utility for its timeline.

"The vast majority of what we've talked about tonight deals with delays in the part that NES works with, and I'm not suggesting that they are unreasonable delays," Phillips said at the committee meeting.

NES declined to offer more details on its contracts or on overall delays.

"NES has an infrastructure use agreement that outlines certain terms and conditions and NES has a history of meeting those terms and conditions and deadlines for all communications companies that adhere to the provisions of the infrastructure use agreement," NES said in an emailed statement.

Councilman Anthony Davis, who is co-sponsoring the "One Touch" ordinance, said he understands that Google Fiber is not experiencing the same permitting delays from NES because it has worked out a contract with the utility to expedite the process. As a result, Google's issues are with delays it experiences from other providers after obtaining permits from NES. The ordinance does not address NES's permitting timeline, Davis said.

"We might need to dig more into why Comcast, when they submit make ready work, it's taking so long," Davis said. "If there is an issue with NES permitting process, which there may be, we need have a direct conversation about that.... It's one of those discussions I want to have as we all get around the table as stakeholders and dig into the weeds of what's going on."

Google did not respond to requests for comment.

Councilman-at-large John Cooper said he looked to NES to facilitate better competition among internet providers and to provide them with good customer service as well.

"These companies are paying fees, so they should have appropriate service, too,"

Cooper said. "The public has an interest in everybody staying in place and competing. Ultimately, the goal here is for much lower rates and better service. That's going to require these companies competing against each other." – ***The Tennessean***



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