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Telecom deal might bring iPhone to Vt.

BY DAN MCLEAN, FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • AUGUST 6, 2008

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[Vermont](#) might end up with iPhone service after all.

The Federal Communications Commission has approved Verizon Wireless' \$2.67 billion buyout of Unicel — with a few conditions, including that Unicel's Vermont assets be sold to another company to preserve competition.

The FCC order opens the door for AT&T to come to Vermont — bringing with it access to Apple's iPhone, which operates exclusively on AT&T's cell network.

Citing a potential for "competitive harm," the FCC ruled six Unicel market areas in the United States — including three zones that comprise Vermont — must be divested for the deal to be approved. Two regions in Washington state and one portion of upstate [New York](#) must also be sold, the July 31 order said.

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Verizon Wireless and Rural Cellular Corp., which operates Unicel, are the two largest cell phone companies in Vermont.

The Vermont Telecommunications Authority said in an e-mail Monday evening, "You will be able to purchase an iPhone in a few months."

Tuesday morning, however, the authority's executive director, Bill Shuttleworth, said he didn't want to speculate on whether AT&T is coming to Vermont. The telephone companies will make any announcements, he said.

The three cell phone firms involved had few words about any pending deals.

"It's premature to comment on any deal The process is still under way," AT&T spokesman David Mancuso said.

"Until everything is done, nothing is done," he said. "If we do come into Vermont, we want to do it in the right way."

A buyer for the Vermont markets has not been selected, Verizon Wireless spokeswoman Robin Nicol said. Unicel referred all calls to Verizon.



David Boyd, 20, an employee at Small Dog Electronics, has had an iPhone since October with a Unicel service plan he purchased in Connecticut.

UNICEL BUYOUT APPROVED

BUYER: Verizon Wireless of Basking Ridge, N.J. Customers: 67.2 million.

SELLER: Rural Cellular Corp. (Unicel) of Alexandria, Minn. Customers: 790,000 in 15 states.

PRICE: \$2.67 billion.

FCC CONDITIONS: For the sale to go through, Unicel's assets in six markets — which include all of Vermont — must be sold to a company that can compete with Verizon Wireless.

MORE INFORMATION: Read the FCC order at www.fcc.gov under "FCC Consents With Conditions to Verizon Wireless Acquisition"

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Unicel assets identified by the FCC must be sold to a third party within 120 days of Verizon Wireless' purchase of Rural Cellular, which has 790,000 customers in 15 states.

The buyer must be a company the U.S. Department of Justice determines to be "an effective competitor to Verizon Wireless," the FCC order said.

The closing is slated to occur soon, Nicol said.

FCC Commissioner Michael Copps said it's "particularly important" for Verizon to divest all of Unicel's facilities and customers in Vermont "to the nation's largest GSM carrier — it will ensure that native Vermonters and visitors to the state who happen to have GSM phones will continue to be able (to) use their handsets."

AT&T is the nation's largest GSM carrier, Mancuso said of the technology used by iPhone.

There are two basic cell phone technologies: Code Division Multiple Access, or CDMA, which is used by Verizon, and Global System for Mobile, or GSM, which is used by Unicel and AT&T, among others.

"I think that's as far as anyone has gone — which doesn't leave a whole lot of doubt," Shuttleworth said of Copps' statement regarding whether AT&T will come to Vermont.

Unicel customers will have a "seamless transition" to the new provider, Shuttleworth said. Only the name on the bills will change, he said.

There were nearly 335,000 cell phone accounts in Vermont about two years ago, according to the FCC. Subscribers by company were not available.

Pining for iPhones

The possibility that iPhones could finally be coming to Vermont is followed closely in some quarters.

"I am an Apple user, have been for years," said Ben Brunt, a Burlington Web designer and photographer. "Anything new from Apple is sitting on my desk."

Everything, that is, except either the first or second generation iPhone. The iPhone is a personal digital assistant, or PDA, which is widely admired for [innovation](#) and ingenuity — and operates only with AT&T cell service.

"The technology is amazing. To be kind of into everything Apple does and not being able to tap into that technology is frustrating," the 24-year-old said.

Brunt said he considered securing an iPhone by using his parents' billing address in [Maine](#), but didn't want the inconvenience of having a 207 area code.

An earlier plan that called for bringing AT&T to Vermont, also as a side effect of the Unicel buyout, was scuttled this year because portions of three southern Vermont counties would have been excluded.

"So we said, 'No,'" Julie Brill, an assistant [attorney general](#), said in June, noting there would have been a "near monopoly" in those portions of Vermont. She could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Apple advocates throughout Vermont are hopeful a deal to bring AT&T and the iPhone to Vermont materializes.

"We've been hearing about this for many months. It's something we are hopeful about," said Ed Shepard, marketing manger for Small Dog Electronics in Waitsfield and South Burlington, which specializes in Apple products. "A lot of people here would love to switch to AT&T and use the iPhone."

Sanders not satisfied

Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., has written several letters to the FCC, raising issues dealing with the sale of Unicel. Since fall, he has been vocal about concerns that the Unicel buyout would bring Verizon Wireless closer to a monopoly in Vermont. The senator continues to be disappointed about the lack of cell coverage in rural areas.

"Unfortunately, this buyout of Unicel by Verizon Wireless contains no guarantees whatsoever that the needs of rural Vermonters will be addressed. My office will continue to push to expand broadband and cell phone

service to every person in Vermont," Sanders said in written statement Tuesday.

FCC Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein echoed some of Sanders' concerns, but last week's order does not call for rural service guarantees.

"The lack of reliable wireless service in many of our rural areas stunts economic growth and the capabilities of first responders," Adelstein wrote along with the order, adding that the FCC should "examine ways to accelerate buildout in rural America."

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