

FOCUS

THE BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE • NOVEMBER 17, 1996



ILLUSTRATION/DAVID LESH

COMMUNICATION

Get ready for a 10-digit phone

BY SIMSON L. GARFINKEL

Should 1 million people in the Boston area have their phone number changed, or should 3 million people be forced to dial 10 digits every time they want to make a local phone call? That's the question that the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities must decide before the end of this year.

It's been more than eight years since the last area code split. Back in 1988, an invisible line was drawn around Boston that divided our region into two calling areas: 617 and 508. Telephone subscribers in and near Boston kept their old area code; everybody else was forced to change.

Today it seems natural to many people that Boston and the nearby communities should have one area code, while the rest of eastern Massachusetts should have an-

other. But at the time, the area code split was a hassle for millions. Is it worth a repeat, just to avoid longer, 10-digit numbers?

The short answer is no, it is not. The 10-digit option is the only one that can meet the rapidly escalating demand for telephone service in the Boston area. Better that we resign ourselves now to longer telephone numbers than to endure an endless string of new area code splits over the next few decades.

Still, it's not an easy call. To appreciate the complexity of the issue, consider the background:

The 617/508 split was supposed to provide enough new telephone numbers to

PHONES, Page D5

Simson L. Garfinkel writes about technology from his house on Martha's Vineyard, where he must dial 11 digits to reach the mainland.

Resigning ourselves to a 10-digit number

■ PHONES

Continued from Page D1

last until the year 2010. But according to Nynex, at our current rate of growth the 617 area code will run out of new phone numbers in just two years; the 508 area code will be used up in three years. As a result, in 1998 the Boston region will be getting two new area codes: 781 and 978. How should numbers in those new area codes be given out?

Nynex has proposed what it calls a "geographic overlay" plan. Under this plan, no telephone numbers in eastern Massachusetts would change. Instead, new telephone lines installed in the Boston area would get telephone numbers in area code 781, and new phone lines installed in outlying areas would get telephone numbers in 978. The two new codes would "overlay" the existing ones.

But this plan is complicated by a recent ruling by the Federal Communications Commission. Under that ruling, any region that implements an area code overlay plan must also adopt 10-digit dialing for all telephone calls - even for calls placed within the same area code. So if the Nynex overlay plan is adopted, people living, say, on Massachusetts Avenue in Boston will have to dial (617) 727-2543 if they want to call a few streets away to the attorney general's communication division to complain about their telephone service.

Attorney General Scott Harshbarger opposes the overlay plan.

He wants Nynex to implement a "geographic split" instead. This would largely be a repeat of the 1988 split: The current 617 area code would be split into 617 and 781, while a chunk would be taken out of the current 508 area code. All of the customers in that region would have their area code changed to 978.

It's not surprising that a product marketing manager working for Nynex might think that telephone numbers are 10 digits long, whereas a policy analyst working in the attorney general's office might think that phone numbers are 7 digits. Nynex is a large, multistate company. On Beacon Hill, all politics and all phone calls are local.

And there is an institutional suspicion of change. While Harshbarger opposes the overlay plan primarily on "fairness" grounds, he also points out that such a plan has never been tried before in Massachusetts. But 10-digit dialing for some or all telephone numbers is commonplace in other US cities. Under Harshbarger's reasoning, Touch Tone, cellular telephones and cable television never should have been permitted in this state, either: When they were new, they also had "never been tried before in Massachusetts."

What about 7-digit vs. 10-digit dialing?

No matter which plan is adopted, Massachusetts residents are likely to be dialing the area code for more and more of their telephone calls. Call an 800 number, call a

friend in California, call a business in New York, and you'll be dialing the area code. If you live in Malden and want to call Boston, you'll be dialing 11 digits. Indeed, the only people who won't be 11 digits under the attorney general's plan are people who are making calls to their neighbors, businesses that are around the corner or to their own town government.

Harshbarger says that the geographical split will keep 8 million

phone customers from having to dial area codes just to reach homeowners and businesses across the street. On the other hand, these days telephones with automatic dialers and speed dialing offered by the phone company means that fewer people are dialing phone numbers all the time.

While Harshbarger opposes the overlay plan primarily on 'fairness' grounds, he also points out that such a plan has never been tried before in Massachusetts.

Under the attorney general's plan, a million people would have to be assigned a new area code, a considerable inconvenience by any measure. (Although, on the plus side, people in Boston trying to call a nearby, established party, such as the attorney general's office, would dial the same 7-digit number they use today.)

"Under the Nynex [overlay] proposal, everyone - current and new Nynex customers - would be required to dial 10 digits to make a local phone call," says Harshbarger. "And every new homeowner and every new business that moves into certain areas is likely to be assigned completely new area codes. That's overly complicated, confusing and unfair."

Nynex counters Harshbarger's "fairness" argument by saying that it's just as unfair to ask a million people to change their area codes. Remember, for the customers in 508 who will be shifted into 978, this will be the second time in 10 years they've had their area code changed.

"Fundamentally, it's the plan that is the least disruptive to our customers," says

Thomas DeSisto, Nynex managing director of regulatory planning. Furthermore, says DeSisto, the overlay plan is a "long-term solution to the whole issue of telephone numbers and rapid growth that we see now and that we have seen over the past five to 10 years."

Nynex says its overlay plan will save customers the expense of having to reprint their stationery, change their signs and reprogram their cellular telephones, paging systems and every computer that uses telephone numbers.

If the overlay plan is approved, Nynex will also reprogram its computers so that we won't have to dial the digit "1." We will then have true 10-digit dialing for everywhere in the United States - across the street or across the country.

...
The difference of opinion between Nynex and Harshbarger reflects their opposing philosophies about telephone numbers. Indeed, they each have a different idea of what a telephone number actually is. To Nynex, a phone number looks like 10 digits: 617-555-1212. But to the attorney general's office, a phone number is 7 digits, and area codes are an added inconvenience. You can see this on the attorney general's stationery, which lists his office phone number like this: (617) 727-2200. The area code is a parenthetical appendage - or prefix - to the real number.

Four separate area codes for eastern Massachusetts means that a lot of people will be dialing 10 digits for many of their telephone calls anyway. And with Touch Tone dialing, which today is nearly universal, the difference between dialing 7 digits and dialing 10 digits is the difference between spending 2 seconds and 3 seconds dialing the phone.

But the real reason that the DPU should adopt the overlay plan is that two more area codes are not going to be enough for eastern Massachusetts. More home computers, more teen-agers wanting their own telephone lines, more pagers, more Internet providers, more businesses with direct-dial extensions, will all require more telephone numbers. Adding two new area codes only doubles the number of available telephone numbers.

According to the attorney general's office, if we use the geographical split, the new 617 area code is expected to require splitting again in the year 2009, the new 508 area code will need to be split in the year 2011 and the new 781 area codes will have

to be split in the year 2014 ... assuming, of course, that we don't have another round of explosive growth.

Smaller and smaller geographical area codes aren't in anyone's interest. Already today, many people think of their telephone numbers as 10 digits long, and not 7. That's because the current area code map makes little sense: Wellesley is in 617, whereas Salem is in 508.

This fall, the Massachusetts DPU filed a petition with the FCC,

asking if the DPU could adopt a geographical overlay plan for cellular telephone users, and a geographical split for everybody else.

That's because it's difficult for cellular phone users to change their area code: Each phone must be specially reprogrammed. Meanwhile, an industry group that met earlier this summer recommended a geographical split, then proceeded to redraw the map so that more businesses wouldn't have to change their area code from 617 to 781 or from 508 to 978. But that doesn't solve the problem, either. The area codes 617 and 508 will keep filling up - and they'll fill up faster if we let more people stay in them today.

The only practical long-term solution is for eastern Massachusetts to adopt an overlay plan and 10-digit dialing. That will save us the upheaval of not just these area code splits but of the one we would have to have in 10 years' time as well.

Nynex says its overlay plan will save customers the expense of having to reprint their stationery, change their signs and reprogram their cellular telephones.
