

United Telephone Co.:

Shortcomings a trade-off for low rates

By EVAN SCHUMAN
Staff Writer

It has been more than a decade since either of the two United Telephone companies that service Sussex County have asked for a rate increase.

Partly as a consequence, the company's 38,000 Sussex County business and residential customers have enjoyed some of the lowest monthly telephone rates in the country.

But they have also been served by

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a phone system whose equipment in some communities is antiquated — designs dating as far back as 1917.

Problems with outdated equipment, personnel reductions due to computerization and cost-cutting, and the peculiar topography of Sussex County have resulted in a number of shortcomings with local phone service, including static, background noise, slow response times at the business and repair offices, and few or no custom calling services.

Company officials at United, while acknowledging some of the problems, contend they are not severe. They say they have managed to modernize at a reasonable rate while keeping the cost of phone service low. They add, however, that they may be forced to seek a rate hike as early as next year.

A THREE-MONTH in-depth review by the Herald of the two United Telephone companies that affect Sussex County phone users — the United Telephone Company of New Jersey and the United-Sussex Telephone Company — found:

- During the first six months of this year, more than 125 oral and written complaints against United's two Sussex County companies were filed with the state's Board of Public Utilities in Newark — a complaint rate seven times higher than that of New Jersey Bell.

The complaints included poor line quality, service problems, billing er-

United vs. Bell		
	UNITED	BELL
BASIC MONTHLY RATE* RESIDENTIAL BUSINESS	\$6.15-67 \$8.00-912.50	\$7.45-88.19 \$11.00-912.54
AVG. TIME ELAPSED TO GET SERVICE REP.	5-15 MINUTES	92% BY SECOND RING
TIME TO GET LISTED BY DIRECTORY ASSISTANCE	UP TO TWO WEEKS	11* TO THREE DAYS
BPU COMPLAINTS (FIRST SIX MONTHS OF 1985)	125 38,000 CUSTOMERS	1,001 3 MILLION CUSTOMERS
CALLING FEATURES**	25% WITH ALL FOUR	70% WITH ALL FOUR
REPAIR SPEED	90% COMPLETED IN 24 HOURS	ALMOST 100% WITHIN 8 HOURS

* Monthly rate if no equipment is leased
** Three-way calling, call forwarding, speed dialing and call waiting.

rors, unjustified phone disconnections and installation foulups.

- In June alone, described by company officials as a typical month, about 1,500 customers — mostly from Sussex County — called United's 611 Repair Center complaining that they couldn't make outgoing calls. More than 1,000 additional customers said they either couldn't get incoming calls or reported poor line quality and excessive noise and static.

- Customers can be put on hold for as long as 45 minutes before a service representative at the business office will answer. Various company officials estimate the average delay ranges from 5-15 minutes.

- It takes up to two weeks to get a new number listed with directory assistance. Last year, delays of up to

two months were reported. When United tried to correct the problem in January, it still took up to three weeks to get listed, and more than a dozen longtime customers were dropped from directory assistance altogether. Company officials say some customers are still not listed because of "computer glitches."

- Due to the age and lack of sophistication of some switching equipment, 28,500 Sussex County United customers have either no custom calling features — such as call waiting, call forwarding, speed dialing or three-way calling — or they have restrictions on which services they can have.

- Sussex County United Telephone customers have virtually no choice

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Customers of United Telephone denied 'equal access'

By EVAN SCHUMAN
Staff Writer

The situation could be described as the telephone industry's sequel to Catch-22.

On March 1, in an effort to help customers of small independent phone companies, the Federal Communication Commission ordered that any independent phone company must offer equal access — a procedure which allows the customer to select the long-distance company he wants and then enables him to use that company's lines by dialing "1" — within three years if any legitimate long-distance company requested it.

STEP-BY-STEP switching equipment, first introduced in 1917, and crossbar switching equipment, first introduced during World War II, both of which are used in Sussex County, are not sophisticated enough to handle the electronics of equal access. Equal access makes charging calls

to an independent long-distance company as easy as using AT&T, giving the independents the competitive edge the FCC thought was needed.

Many long-distance companies had complained that dialing a series of digits to identify the customer before making the call — the only way the independent companies can have customers where there is no equal access — was inconvenient for the average consumer.

LAST YEAR, the FCC ordered Bell companies to start offering equal access in a zone-by-zone timetable. As of June, 522,000, or 17.5 percent, of New Jersey Bell's customers were on equal access.

Asked about equal access, Jake Spangler, spokesman for United Telephone, said United does not offer it because no long-distance company has requested it.

He added that the long-distance companies do not offer service to the area because they don't feel they can

make a profit in an area as sparsely populated as Sussex County.

Tom Bester, spokesman for Sprint, said his company considers population when selecting where they will offer service, but other concerns are also important, including the proximity to major transmission lines.

In Sussex County, "You'd probably have a better chance of getting (Sprint coverage) than someplace in Montana simply because you are near more populated areas," he said.

But several other long-distance companies, including MCI and Al-net, said they simply could not work with the technology that United offers.

"When we talked to United, we didn't discuss the New Jersey properties because their equipment was too antiquated. We cannot interface with that equipment," said MCI spokesman Don Campbell.

Depending on the long-distance company's equipment, either digital or electronic switching equipment is required.

WHAT THE FCC decided to do, according to Mary Brown, special assistant to the chief of the FCC's Common Carrier Bureau, is tell the smaller independents that if they received any requests, they would have three years to install the equipment and upgrade all necessary systems.

Brown said the commission did not think it made sense to force every small independent company to offer equal access when it might take several years before a long-distance carrier would use it.

"It would have necessitated a massive reinvestment on the part of the rural phone companies," she said. She added that the commission believed the smaller independent companies would eventually, on their own, replace their older

switching equipment with digital switches when the old equipment wears out.

But an FCC engineer, who asked to remain anonymous, said he thought the commission's thinking was unrealistic. He said most small independent companies will merely clean and maintain their switches frequently, replacing each part as it wears down.

"It's probably always cheaper to fix stepper switches than replace them," he said, particularly when the replacement is digital. "I guess that could be done forever. It depends on whether there's a desire to get something newer. The economics just suggest that it's cheaper to keep fixing rather than buy a new switch."

EVERY MAJOR long-distance carrier company contacted said they would not approach United until they upgraded their switching equipment and offered equal access.

And United, following the FCC's order, says it has no reason to offer equal access until the long-distance companies approach them.

While it may not be equal access, about one-fourth of those living in the county do have an option on long-distance carriers.

A small long-distance company in Morristown, Garden State Telephone, buys high-volume long distance lines from United and sells time on that line to local customers at a discount of between 20 and 45 percent. The company says it has between 500 and 600 customers in Sussex County.

A disadvantage of the service is a 14-digit security code which has to be entered in addition to the 10-digit telephone number.

Service currently is offered in Newton, Sparta-Lake Mohawk, Andover Borough, Andover Township, Stanhope, Hopatcong and Branchville, as well as Montague, Vernon, Sussex and Green.

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United

of a long-distance company since all of the major ones — such as MCI, Sprint and Allnet — refuse to work with what an MCI senior engineer described as United's "antiquated equipment."

• Due to the topography of Sussex County, the frequency of bad weather and United's equipment problems, local phones are extremely susceptible to static and interruption of service during heavy rains or severe storms.

From its corporate headquarters in Kansas City, United Telecommunications Inc., the nation's third-largest telephone company with \$5.5 billion in assets, operates 21 telephone companies throughout the United States, plus one long-distance network.

The corporation also owns more than a dozen computer firms, video graphic plants, a security company, and a cellular-phone manufacturer with locations throughout the U.S. and Europe.

In New Jersey, United is one of three parent companies providing local phone service. New Jersey Bell, with 3 million customers, covers most of the state. United, with its five New Jersey subsidiaries covering Hunterdon and Somerset counties and portions of Sussex, Warren and Morris counties, services about 103,000 customers. Warwick Valley Telephone Co. has 5,700 customers in portions of Sussex and Passaic counties.

WHILE UNITED, the corporate entity, is regarded by industry observers as a big spender that pours large sums of money into elaborate ventures, the independent phone companies are described as extraordinarily dollar-conscious.

United Telephone of New Jersey, covering Andover Borough, Andover Township, Branchville, Franklin, Sparta, Stillwater, Hampton, Fredon, Ogdensburg, Hamburg, Newton, and parts of Frankford, Green, Walpack and Byram, and United-Sussex Telephone Company, covering Sussex, Montague and Wanaque, parts of Vernon, Lafayette and Frankford, are not exceptions.

Top executives in Kansas City have been "trying to build a fiber optic nationwide network, to be another AT&T," said Donna Jaegers, senior telecommunications analyst for the Paine Webber brokerage firm in New York. "Chances are they're going to use a lot of money in the next couple of years."

"But on the operating company side, they are very cost-conscious," she said. "On the local company side, they will continue to focus on cost-cutting."

JAEGERS CITED the company's accelerated use of computers as an example. "They're computerizing their industry. And with that comes the ability to use software instead of people."

Last June, United began a major consolidation effort in which all operators and business offices were moved to the company's New Jersey headquarters in Clinton. The Newton business office was closed in October.

Directory assistance service was given back to Bell, facilitating — along with computerization — a 25 percent staff reduction in three years, including all 10 service representatives in the Newton office.

Since the end of 1981, the payroll of the five United offices in New Jersey has been reduced from 619 to 458. The number of employees working for United Telephone of New Jersey, which covers most of Sussex County, fell from 194 to 93.

Company officials maintain that employee reductions have not hampered improvements to the system brought by computerization, although they have conceded there have been problems transferring repair and service records from paper to the computer. Some information has either been lost or incorrectly fed into the system, according to company employees.

United executives nonetheless



COMMUNICATIONS CENTER — Dennis Sugar, network supervisor for United Telephone Co., checks out some of the equipment in the company's switching office on Adams Street in Newton. (Pat Decker photo)

maintain that the quality of service is improving and that they are generally satisfied with the transfer of records.

They say they are also pleased with the current level of service they are providing, an opinion shaped, they say, by comments and letters from their customers.

WHEN REPAIR and service

United's switching equipment				
TECHNOLOGY	FIRST DISTRIBUTED	EXCHANGE	CUSTOMERS	FEATURES OFFERED
STEP-BY-STEP	1917	293 362	1,169 2,568	No custom calling. No custom calling.
CROSSBAR	1937	383 827 948	9,089 7,536 3,978	No custom calling. No custom calling. No custom calling.
ELECTRONIC	Early 1960s	729	6,715	Three-way calling. Call forwarding. Speed dialing. No call waiting.
DIGITAL	Early 1980s	875 579 786	6,906 1,914 1,516	Three-way calling. Call forwarding. Speed dialing. Call waiting.

problems arise. United officials point to the speed which they repair or correct them. The company maintains that 80 percent of the problems phoned into its repair division are resolved within 24 hours.

By comparison, Bell of New Jersey says that almost 100 percent of its repairs are completed within eight hours.

When asked about the 128 complaints filed against them with the BPU in Newark, United's vice president in charge of New Jersey operations, George J. Wickard, responded, "For 103,000 customers, that's not a great number." (Combined, all of New Jersey's five United telephone companies serve about 103,000 customers. The complaints referred to, however, originated only from one of their companies, United of New Jersey, serving about 30,000 customers.)

One thing that customers have not been complaining about are the local phone rates, among the lowest in the country.

United's local operations have been able to do without rate increases since 1973, partially by holding the line on finances, according to industry observers.

An outgrowth of the AT&T divestiture, however, could spell economic trouble for United in the next few years.

UNITED WAS able to earn a strong profit in the early 1980s because of its partnership arrangement with New Jersey Bell and AT&T, according to Wickard.

"Our (financial) situation is going

to change dramatically" in the next three years, said Wickard, now that United will have to charge directly based on charges and revenues.

"The partnership arrangement was excellent," he said. "It was an area of good growth and it generated a tremendous amount of tolls."

Locally, United's two companies are making a fair profit, but industry financial analysts say they should be

million this year and more than \$7 million targeted for next year.

In March, equipment modifications made it unnecessary for Sussex County phone customers to dial "1" when placing a call within the 201 area code. Company officials also point to last year's upgrading of their toll trunking network which facilitated billing and, they claimed, made the system faster and easier to maintain.

INDUSTRY analysts who watch companies like United say that the company's finances are not as strong as they were and that published figures are somewhat misleading.

United of New Jersey reported profits for 1984 of \$2,615,000, a \$37-7,890 decrease from 1983. United West Jersey, a United company which covers Warren County, reported profits for the same year of \$777,000, a \$272,000 decrease from the previous year.

United only purchased United Sussex from Continental Telephone last year.

ACCORDING to a BPU study, United Sussex's overall rate of return last year was 12.3 percent, while it was 10.85 percent for United New Jersey. The rate of return was 8.9 percent for United West Jersey.

BPU President Barbara A. Curran says the utility board considers a fair overall rate of return to be "about 10 or 11 percent."

"They do have the right to earn a reasonable rate of return."

During the same time period, Warwick Valley, which serves 3,700 customers in Vernon, had a rate of return of 12.75 percent, while it was between 10.5 percent and 11 percent for Bell of New Jersey, which covers Hopatcong and Stanhope and parts of Green, Hardyston and Walpack.

But industry financial observers point out that United's financial picture looks less impressive when company investments are examined. United West Jersey, for example, earned \$777,000 last year on \$12.8 million in investments and United New Jersey's \$2.6 million in profit last year was based on more than \$59 million in investments.

And, should they ever need it, United's New Jersey properties shouldn't expect any help from the parent company in Kansas City, says Alice Bradie, who, as senior telecommunications analyst for the E.F. Hutton brokerage firm in New York, keeps a close watch on United's finances.

BRADIE SAYS United Telecommunications has been overspending on its new long-distance company, and its latest project, fiber optics, a technology in which a laser beam is sent through a small glass tube to transport visual and audio messages. Its chief advantage is that it takes up far less room than standard telephone cable.

United plans to finish laying 4,000 to 5,000 miles of fiber optics cable across the country by the end of this year.

"They've lost in one year about \$65 million" on fiber optics and their long-distance company, Bradie said.

As a result, many top New York brokerage firms, including Paine Webber, Smith Barney and E.F. Hutton, have been strongly urging their clients not to buy United stock and to sell whatever United stock they own.

"I think it's going to hinder overall profits dramatically," said Bradie, "but I don't think it will kill the company either."

DONALD FORSYTHE, United's vice president in charge of corporate communications in Kansas City, admitted that the company lost \$68 million last year, but said that had been anticipated.

"We are in the project's developmental stage," he said.

Concerning the stock recommendations, Forsythe said, "Obviously, we disagree. They (Wall Street analysts) have a different perspective. We think that our strategy is very sound. We think that if we are the first to have a fiber optic network, it will be a major advantage in the marketplace."

"We think that with the size and the growth potential of that market, the potential rewards are commensurate with the risks," he said.

Bradie said the structure and corporate attitude of United would not result in money being siphoned from the small phone companies nor would the corporation give money to one of its phone companies even if it was failing.

"Does General Foods subsidize a cereal that is not making it?" she asked.

Much of the phone system technology in Sussex County dates back to pre-World War II, with phone systems in Montague and Blairstown, in Warren County, working on technology developed before 1917.

Many of the complaints about the quality of service in Sussex County can be linked to the lack of sophistication of the company's switching apparatus, according to industry experts.

There are four different telephone technologies presently in use: step-by-step switches — also known as

stepper switches — crossbar, electronic and digital.

Step-by-step switches, the type used in Montague and Blairstown, were introduced by Western Electric in 1917.

The step-by-step switch "is almost obsolete," said New Jersey Bell spokesman James W. Carrigan.

WESTERN ELECTRIC starting mass-producing the switches in 1926, according to Robert Garnet, corporate historian for AT&T in New York, but the steppers were outdated when the crossbar was developed in 1937.

The crossbar switch began being mass distributed right after World War II, Garnet said.

The crossbar switch itself was replaced in most of the telephone industry by the electronic switch around 1960.

More than 22,000 residents covered by the Newton, Franklin and Branchville exchanges are still serviced by crossbar switches.

United's state lobbyist, Brad Adcock, says keeping up with the pace of technological change is not always easy.

"You just can't do it," he said. "Digital technology (first used in the early 1980s) is already outdated. Any time you install a central office, it's outdated because you ordered it two years before you installed it."

SPANGLER CONCEDED that the phone service of some United customers was "limited" by outmoded technology. "If everybody in (Montague) picked up all at once, some of them are not going to get dial tones," he said.

But he stressed that some customers would prefer minor service problems to higher monthly phone bills.

"When you're talking about the cost of service, you're talking about how many capital dollars are you going to spend to provide service for these customers at a level at which they would be willing to pay for it," he said.

"If I said to the Montague customer, 'OK, you always want to have dial tones no matter when you ever wanted to pick that phone up. But would you be willing to pay \$30 a month for that kind of service?'"

"And they'd say, 'Aw, you're crazy.' Now if we could assure you,

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Most pay phones still require coin

By EVAN SCHUMAN
Staff Writer

Almost 75 percent of United's pay phones in Sussex County require money to make a call — including emergency, police and fire calls — according to company officials.

The phones, which United says will not be updated until switching equipment is upgraded, are in use throughout the Newton, Franklin and Branchville exchanges.

Bell spokesman Karen Johnson says that 99.9 percent of New Jersey Bell's 80,000 pay phones can access the operator, directory assistance and emergency police and fire numbers immediately, without the customer depositing a coin.

Bell has been upgrading its phones to allow free emergency numbers since 1971, she said.

IN 1982, in a rate increase authorization with New Jersey Bell, the BPU reached an agreement with Bell to eliminate its few remaining old-style phones.

This February, the BPU ordered that all New Jersey private pay phone companies must allow for emergency and operator calls to be made without deposit of any coin, according to BPU spokesman George Dawson.

Of the 685 coin-operated United phones in Sussex County, 476 of them require a dime to make calls.

PAY PHONES in Montague and Blairstown are even older models and do not have the ability to return coins, according to United

spokesman Jake Spangler, and they require that the caller put coins in after the call has been connected.

Many utility regulators throughout the country have been pressuring phone companies to allow emergency calls to be made from any public pay phone as a consumer and public safety measure.

In California, for example, the California Public Utilities Commission has ordered that the state's 23 phone companies must enable customers to reach an operator or emergency number before having to deposit any coins as a requirement to raise their coin rates from 10 to 20 cents.

The order was issued because of the commission's concern for public safety, according to James McCraney, the commission's deputy director of evaluation and compliance.

"The goal here has been to facilitate the use of public phones for emergency purposes," said Martin Mattes, a commission administrative law judge who held hearings on the subject. "There was a concern that (not having the upgraded phones) might involve serious delays in emergency situations merely because (the customer) didn't have the required coins."

"We have no plans at this time to offer service to an operator (or emergency service) without depositing a dime" in those offices, said Spangler, adding that it requires a "very complicated change."

"We feel, at this time, that the time frame and the cost is not in line with our plans to offer new switches in those offices," he said.

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Mr. Montague customer, that maybe once out of a 100 times that you picked up you would have to wait for a dial tone ... but we could charge you only \$7 a month," he'd say, "Sure, I can live with that."

"We have a significant investment in that area (Montague)," said Wickard, adding that customer rates would see "significant ramifications" to pay for rapid depreciation of the equipment.

But Wickard shied away from saying how much an upgrading would cost the consumer. "There is not a direct relationship necessarily. We have changed telephone equipment for customers in areas where there have been no rate changes," he said.

He said next year's upgrading of the Blairstown switch will not mean an increase in the Blairstown monthly bills.

ASKED HOW much it would cost United to upgrade Montague, Wickard said. "We're probably going to be talking about a minimum of \$750,000, just for 1,400 customers."

Wickard said his company is improving the technology in areas that show either heavy growth or strong growth potential.

"We are having significant growth in the Vernon Township, Franklin, Ogdensburg area." He said the company expects to upgrade that office with digital technology next year.

"The growth in the Montague area is such that it is not going to have the highest priority," Wickard added.

In an annual report prepared for the BPU earlier this year, United said it would eliminate all step-by-step switches in New Jersey by 1989, according to Heikki Leaseman, director of the BPU's telecommunications investigation unit.

But Wickard says he isn't aware of any such promise.

"There is no time limit that we have set for all of our offices to be digital," he said.

WHEN ASKED when Montague would be taken off step-by-step switches, Wickard said, "It has not been placed in any budget period." He said he was reluctant to make the timetable public.

Step-by-step switches are still used in a few places across the United States — Bell of New Jersey still has two steppers in the southern part of the state, but they are being upgraded — with many of them being used in very sparsely populated parts of the Midwest.

Adcock says that one of the problems with step-by-step and crossbar switches is that they amplify the customer's voice and then transmit it to the other end. With this method, any background or mechanical noises are also amplified, making the line noisier.

Leaseman said he considered stepper switches to be "kind of outdated...with cross-talk, background noise, a slow technology." Cross-talk is hearing someone else's conversation faintly in the background.

"We certainly expect them to maintain adequate levels of service," he said.

ROLAND CURRY, chairman of the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners, said the problems of static, background noise and calls that go dead are problems that "are more predominant in the stepper-type switches."

"Stepper switches, more often than not, need more maintenance than other switches and misdirects are more prevalent in a stepper switch," he said, "but it will operate properly if it is operated properly."

The switches themselves, while they have many limitations, are considered to be extremely sturdy and durable.

"Now it may not be getting the job done in a luxurious fashion," said Michael Gallagher, chief of service evaluation for the BPU, "but it gets the job done."

Not all phone customers, however, agree.

In the first six months of this year, the BPU reviewed 128 oral and written complaints.

ASKED HOW the commission viewed the number of complaints, BPU spokesman George Dawson said, "It is enough (for us) to ask the company for improvements."

Normally, the BPU evaluates utilities only when they ask for a rate increase. Since United has not requested any rate adjustments since 1973, no formal reviews have been conducted for more than a decade.

When complaints are made to the BPU, the utility is contacted by a staff investigator who asks for an explanation.

During the first six months of this year, Bell of New Jersey's 3 million customers filed 1,801 complaints, according to Dawson. That means United's local customers file 700 percent more oral and written complaints per customer than Bell of New Jersey.

MARGARET BIERMAN, who

owns the Valley View Inn in Sparta, is one of the people who filed complaints.

"They didn't have us listed for four months in directory assistance," she said. "And our business is 60 percent dependent on phone calls. Our revenues were considerably down that spring."

"The quality of reception is often bad. When I dial direct, 50 percent of the time I get a busy signal when the line isn't busy. It happens so often that I'm sure it is faulty lines."

"We have quite a lot of static. People say the reception is so bad that they have to call you back and this happens fairly frequently. I think people find the service so bad here that they think there is nothing they can do about it. Like everybody else, we just tolerate it."

MARILYN STIPO, co-owner of High Point Precision, said she filed a complaint after she called United to complain about service and was put on hold for 25 minutes before she got tired and hung up. "I made a note of (the time) so I could point it out to them," she said.

In random phone calls to United's business office line by the Herald, delays of up to 45 minutes were found. Interviews with United service representatives, most of whom spoke on the condition they not be identified, confirmed that a 45-minute delay was not a fluke.

"We have had — more than I'm happy with — a number of problems in transition," Wickard said, referring to the delay in getting through to the business office.

"We're experiencing some very high growth," said Spangler. "We lost a lot of our experienced people when we consolidated. New employees take longer."

COMPANY officials said the problem has grown worse recently because of summer vacations and increased demand for telephone service changes, with people moving and renting summer homes.

Spangler said the company tried hiring temporaries, but it didn't help.

"When you are using Kelly-girl type of people," he said, "they have to get off the line and ask supervisors a lot of questions and that just adds to the problem."

Asked when he thought the answering delays would be cleared up, Wickard said he hoped by the winter, when nine new employees would be fully trained.

Spangler said United would like to see the phones answered within one

minute normally and two minutes during a busy period.

By contrast, a New Jersey Bell business office customer will have a call answered by a service representative on the first or second ring 92 percent of the time, according to Bell spokesman Ted Spencer.

THE REPAIR division at United also has its share of problems, particularly when one of the area's frequent thunder showers hits.

Company officials say static, lines going dead and other service problems often increase dramatically during a lightning storm or thunder shower.

Adcock said the frequency and intensity of storms in the northwestern part of New Jersey are stronger and somewhat more intense than in some other parts of the country.

The problem is intensified because most of United's phone cables are exposed to the air instead of being buried — 25 percent more than New Jersey Bell.

"A big consideration is the atmosphere," said Thomas Burrell, who heads United's repair division. "Our lines are far more susceptible to weather problems than other areas with underground cables."

"On a windy day, the cables are moving all the time and they're going to get cracks," he said.

But Burrell says that since most of the county sits atop a huge bedrock, the cost of putting the lines underground would be "astronomical."

"You're really talking about expense," he said, "and somebody would have to pay for it."

SPANGLER ADMITS that, from time to time, a United customer is going to run into problems, but he attributes most of those problems not to old equipment but to the sparse population of Sussex County.

Spangler says that since the eight Sussex County telephone exchanges are small telephone offices, people think there are more problems because, statistically, he says, the odds are greater that the customer will have trouble.

He compared living in Sparta with a Lake Mohawk exchange to living in New York City: "First of all, Mohawk is a small exchange — what, 4,000 customers? When you live in a big city and you have a 10,000-line switching office, if they have a problem in that 10,000-line switching office, with the amount of facilities and equipment provided to those 10,000 customers, the probability that you may run into that problem is far less than when you're in a smaller office," he said.