EXHIBIT 2
DATE 3/16/11
HB 604

Testimony of Ron Bibler in opposition of utilizing the MTAP special revenue for other purposes (HB604)

Mr. Chair and Committee:

My name is Ron Bibler and I am here today as a member of the Montana Telecommunications Access Program (MTAP). Since 1991, thanks to this program, I have been able to make my own phone calls. Back in that day, my calls were very similar to a two way radio, in that I had to call the relay center, tell them who I wanted to reach, wait for the connection to be established, and then finish every sentence by saying 'go ahead'. I could only make calls....not receive them.

Today, 20 years later, I'm on my fifth or sixth generation of technology and enhancements. I can now pick up a phone that rings in my office or home, and carry on a conversation. One thing that has remained constant since 1991 is that this program has always sustained and supported itself on that dime a month. Can you think of anything else that has grown and improved exponentially but has not increased its funding mechanism? As a comparison the 911 special revenue has gone from twenty-five cents to a dollar over that same time period.

Thru the due diligence of the committee, that dime a line was assessed to land lines, and we included fax lines. Then as cellular service became popular and users migrated from land lines to cell service, we took steps to ascertain that our revenue was still collected. Montana is unique in this regard, because several states didn't allow for that collection in their statue. As cable companies started to provide the telecommunications service, we also collected from them. And now we are seeing VoIP-type services such as Vonnage offered in Montana, we collect from them. Plus, we collect from pre-paid phone services such as Trac-fone. These revenue streams coming into our program are a reflection of our committee being fiscally responsible.

My Bresnan bill and my Qwest bill reflect this ten cent assessment. However noble your intentions are, my telephone bill does not note that that dime is to be used for clothing for foster children or anything else you are diverting these funds for. It is specifically special revenue for the Montana Telecommunications Access Program and that program alone. Diverting these funds sets a bad precedent. DPHHS or the general fund for education is in a unfair situation. They need all the funds they can get, but they have a difficult time advocating against taking our funds. Robbing Peter to pay Paul is never a good idea. We all know how that ends out.

The committee and program have done an outstanding job of being fiscally responsible. At fiscal year end, we do not scramble to spend all of our appropriated dollars. We could do so, and your attempt to divert these funds would give us a very good reason to be certain to expend all of our appropriations every year.

We have known for some time that the Federal government wants to get out of the responsibility of paying for two newer services. Those are what we call Video Relay Services, and the ability to use the Internet for a type of relay service. At the moment, this is a billion dollar program, and I serve on a national committee that oversees this program. If Montana had been responsible for her VRS and IP Relay charges over the last 5 months documented – July to November 2010, we would have had a bill of $426,156, which translates to an annual cost of $1,022,774. That day is coming, and that is why we MUST preserve our fund balance.

To summarize, the MTAP program should not be penalized for having done all the right things over the years. Please vote no on this bill, HB604, or remove all provisions that relate to the MTAP program.

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