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The UTC regulates the services of privately or investor owned utility and transportation companies. Our mission is to ensure that services are fairly priced, available, reliable, and safe.

Regulated companies:

- Telephone
- Electricity
- Natural Gas
- Water
- Garbage
- Recycling
- Residential Movers
- Charter Buses
- Airport Shuttles
- Commercial Ferries
- Natural Gas Pipeline

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Understanding Your Phone Bill

Trying to read and understand the different charges on your telephone bill can be quite confusing. The Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission has heard from many of you who have asked about the various services, charges, fees and taxes on your phone bills. To help you better understand them, we have developed this guide to provide clear information about prices and services that might show up on your telephone bill.

Account Summary

This section tells you what you owe, the payment due date and who is billing you. Some telephone companies include charges for services provided by other companies.

Local Phone Bill Section

This section explains the charges for local phone services. The bill separates local service charges from optional services.

- **Monthly Service Charge**

This charge covers your local monthly phone service.

- **Optional Service Charge**

These charges cover services with monthly fees such as voice messaging, call waiting and Caller ID. Special features with one-time fees, such as tracing a call or directory assistance, are included in this category. Wire-maintenance plans that cover phone repairs if the wiring inside the customer's home is at fault falls under this heading too. Customers don't have to buy these services but they have become very popular in recent years.

Federal Charges

- **Federal Access Charge**

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) allows local phone companies to charge residential customers a fee to help cover the cost of providing local phone service.

- **Federal Universal Service Charge**

Some local phone companies add a universal-service charge. This

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provides financial assistance to low-income customers; customers who live in high-cost areas; and schools, libraries and rural health care providers who receive internet and other advanced services. The amount of the charge may vary between companies.

Taxes

- **Washington Telephone Assistance Program (WTAP)**

WTAP helps eligible low-income households throughout the state afford telephone service. The program is funded through an excise tax of 14 cents per month per line.

- **Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS)**

Telecommunications Devices for the Deaf program allows hearing-impaired persons to make and receive telephone calls. The TRS tax is currently 19 cents a month on each phone line in the state.

- **Enhanced 911 (E-911)**

Every county must be able to identify the location of a caller when they dial 911. The costs for this service are covered through separate state and county taxes. The state tax for 2011 is 25 cents per month. County taxes vary from 50-70 cents a month.

- **Other Taxes**

Local phone companies are required to collect federal, state and municipal utility and sales taxes.

Long-Distance Charges Section

Many local phone companies include charges for other long-distance carriers on the local telephone bill, both local and interstate calls. Customers may choose a local and interstate long-distance company to complete these calls. There are hundreds of different long-distance phone companies with different rates and calling plans. The long distance company's name should appear on the bill along with a toll-free number to call if you have any questions. The long-distance portion of your bill is broken down into the following parts:

- **Call Detail**

This section lists all your long-distance calls, including in-state, out-of-state and international calls. It should show the time of day, length of call, the charge and the phone number and city called.

- **Monthly Plan Fee**

Many long-distance companies offer lower per-minute rates but include a monthly plan fee. Do the math using your estimated monthly calling to determine if the plan will lower your bills.

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- **Minimum Monthly Charge**

Some long-distance companies require customers pay a minimum monthly amount regardless of the amount of toll used. If you are a low-volume user, find a long-distance company that does not include a minimum monthly charge.

- **Federal Universal Service Charge**

This fee helps pay for telecommunications services to schools, libraries and some medical providers. It also helps keep service affordable for the poor and people who live in places that are expensive to serve, especially remote and rural communities.

Other Charges Section

Your telephone company might also include charges for services provided by other carriers. These are charges from information providers who charge by the minute for calls to “900” numbers. Other charges may be from companies you have ordered service from. These charges include Internet services, Web site services and line-maintenance services. In such situations, the telephone company cannot disconnect your phone service for nonpayment of these miscellaneous charges.

Listed by or near the charge should be the name and toll-free number of the company responsible. If you have any questions about the charges, you should contact the company listed immediately.

Consumer Tips

Guarding Against Unwanted Charges

Here are some ways to protect your bill from unnecessary or unwanted charges.

1. Review your bill every month. Look for unfamiliar company names and for calls and services that should not be there. Keep a record of the phone services you have authorized and used.
2. Protect the use of your telephone. You are liable for charges made from your phone, even if the calls were made by someone outside your household.
3. Consider putting “blocks” on your phone use. You may request your telephone company block long distance phone calls and/or 900 number calls.
4. Read all forms and promotional materials carefully before signing up for telephone services.
5. Ask questions about anything you do not understand.
6. Act quickly on any matters that you dispute or question.

How to dispute a charge on your phone bill

If you have been charged incorrectly for a service, contact the company responsible for the charge and your local phone company to dispute the charge. Read the bill closely to find the company responsible for the charge. You can also ask the phone company to “recourse” or reverse the disputed charges back to the company who billed for the service. That company may still attempt to collect payment for the service in some other way.