

## **Suffolk withholds payments to Verizon in surcharge dispute**

As previously reported by Rick Brand of Newsday/May 28, 2014

Suffolk County has begun withholding \$25,000 a month in bill payments to Verizon because the company has repeatedly refused to turn over nearly \$307,000 in surcharges on customers that help fund the emergency 911 system, Comptroller Joseph Sawicki Jr. said.

Sawicki ordered his staff to withhold part of the county's \$500,000 monthly payment to Verizon for telephone landlines until Suffolk collects what audits found is owed. He said the county, which pays \$6.6 million a year to Verizon for landline service, would recoup the full amount owed in about a year by partially withholding payments to Verizon.

All phone customers are required to pay a state-imposed 35-cent-per-month surcharge for the 911 system.

A comptroller's audit covering the period from 2005 to 2013 found Verizon underpaid the county because it improperly imposed a 3 percent "incollectible adjustment" for delinquent accounts, beyond the 2 percent administrative fee permitted by law.

"Verizon has no right to withhold these monies collected from Suffolk customers to fund our critical E-911 operations," Sawicki said. "Plain and simple, it's not their money."

Philip Santoro, a Verizon spokesman in Boston, declined to comment on Sawicki's withholding of payments or whether the company will limit or cut off service to Suffolk.

"You're talking about one of our customers and we don't comment on customer accounts," Santoro said. "It's a privacy issue."

After the audit, released in January, Verizon did pay the county \$106,000 for the past three years. In an earlier response to the county, Verizon officials said there is a three-year statute of limitations on what the county can legally collect, a claim that Sawicki disputes.

The company also said it is "just a bill and collection agent" and "should only be required to pay what is truly collected from customers." However, Verizon refused to turn over records of nonpayers. A company official said it would be "overly burdensome" to provide a list of nonpayers and what they owe.

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