

Sidewalks: Paying by the Stroll

I've been immersed in so-called tele-communications issues for a long time but I haven't posted too much lately because I'm not satisfied with net neutrality and am trying to figure out how to explain that the problem is more fundamental (as in "Telecom Phrase"). How come I have to plead for neutrality when we're talking about infrastructure that we should own?

One of the classic marketing clichés is that people don't buy the drill, they buy the hole. A good marketer or, for that matter, politician, knows that people want solutions rather than having to worry about every detail themselves. I must've been thinking too much about those who want to do us too much good when I went to sleep last night ...

Morning of my First Day in At Your Service Village!

The ad campaign was compelling – Freedom from Choice. They provided everything I could ever want, or was it that I could want anything they provided. No matter, I bought one of the houses as soon as I could. I was impressed by how little they charged me – in fact, by signing up for their lifetime service plan the house was practically free. Sure, the penalty for living could buy an entire house in my old neighborhood but who can resist a bargain?

I arrived in a container with the rest of the furniture and hadn't been outside yet. Apparently the movers didn't want to leave anything to chance and they told me it wasn't responsible to just carry the furniture and risk my getting lost along the way. Now that they'd moved us in I was ready to venture forth and stroll around without any particular intent other than casual exploration.

I stepped out to take my stroll and was immediately accosted (in the nicest way, of course) by a gaggle of TSP (Transportation Service Provider) agents vying to sell me the use of their sidewalks. Actually, they called it a Transportation Service – I didn't have to worry about the details of the sidewalk itself. They realized that I was confused by the ability and the need to choose my sidewalk provider. They reacted as if they were speaking to a dunce and explained that competition was necessary in order to keep the prices down. If they had to share one sidewalk they couldn't guarantee the Quality of Stroll and QoS is very important. Imagine if I started to go to the grocery and had to slow down because someone was walking too slowly. I was about to ask why I couldn't just walk around them when I saw the big "do not walk on the Astroturf signs". I had to limit myself to the QoS provided by the TSPs. Sidewalks are scarce and they had to limit the quality in

order to assure that everyone gets "fair" use of the scarce supply of sidewalks – you can only run three or four sidewalks from the town center to each house – any more and you'd lose the remaining 10% of the land.

I was getting antsy so I just chose Walkstra because they had already paved most of the country and had wandering arrangements in the many of the other towns. If I bought all my services from them I could also save money when I walked to my car and then drove on their broad-ways – the high speed version of the sidewalk. Or so I thought, turns out they provide high speed transport service also ... but walking to their bus was free because it was included in the fare. In marketing free is important, I could freely choose which of their bus rides to buy.

I was anxious to get started but I had to tell him where I was going so they could determine what to charge me. Sidewalks are expensive – even if we'd already paid for them. After all, do I want to pay higher taxes to cover the cost of the sidewalk – of course not. Taxes are bad. It's far better to pay a \$100 price for their services than pay \$10 in taxes. It's like the excitement I feel when I can get something for 50% off – it doesn't really matter whether I need it, I'm saving so much money! I looked a bit confused but quickly suppressed such thoughts – I didn't want to spoil the community's harmony by asking disquieting questions.

He seemed disappointed when I said that I didn't know where I was going – I just wanted to take an idle stroll. "An Idle Stroll?" he said, starting to reprimand me for wasting a valuable sidewalk so I had to respond quickly and said "uh to buy cigarettes?" It was out of character for me since I didn't smoke but I guess my intuition was right when he seemed pleased. After all, addicts pay a lot of money again and again. He was excited and told me that they had a discount arrangement so they would automatically deliver my cigarettes for a small fee and save me the time, but not the cost of walking. After all, if they didn't charge me for the walk I didn't take how could they afford to provide their services? It's part of their uber-alles (or all-in-one) plan which gives me the illusion of a discount because all of my trips and travel and purchases and activities are listed on one bill.

He reminded me that this is America and if a TSP makes an investment in a sidewalk it deserves to be paid back no matter what it costs. This isn't like today's Russia where companies have to try to compete. It's 1930's depression-era America with its fantasy of a planned economy and guaranteed returns for the carriers. The purpose of the

government and regulation is to assure the health of the corporations for unlike a person a corporation has to last forever because change is confusing and bad.

I wasn't in the mood for his lecture but he seemed to have a need to educate newcomers who didn't appreciate how hard the TSPs worked to give us what we were supposed to want and how much we should appreciate what we are given. It costs a lot to be a TSP – just keeping track of what cigarettes people smoke is very difficult. They can't make it all back by selling the information to the insurance companies. Keeping track of all the billable events is hard work but they are very good at it – it's their only real business. The sidewalks are just accounted for as an expensive if keeping people in billable paths. It isn't easy to turn a stroll into a billable event.

He reminded me that it isn't just about billing – it's about safety. After all, it is their patriotic duty to keep track of our travels and report them to the government. He said that he knows I'm not a terrorist so that I couldn't possibly object. He appreciates my cooperation and so does my government which protects me as well as his business.

While he expected me to conform to their Terms of Service (ToS) in return for their maintaining QoS (Quality of Stroll) I could trust them to be tolerant. Sure, inspired by Singapore's rules, they ban spitting but if I sneeze and some droplets escape, they're not going to punish me as if I intended to spit as long as I quickly seek medical care. They wouldn't prosecute me for disparagement as long as I kept my thoughts to myself.

It took me a while to get used to all the rules. At least my neighbor used the same TSP so I didn't have to walk all the way downtown to visit – I only need to stroll (purposefully) a few blocks to the nearest sidewalk satellite kiosk – though it's still a billable event. I'm also careful not to step on cracks – not sure why but they tell me that it's for safety – just like the ban on using new-fangled devices in airplanes – someone's cousin's uncle's niece's preschooler stepped on a crack and broke a tooth once maybe.

He then noticed I was carrying a book with me and he asked to look at it – well, not quite asked, I could tell by his tone that I had no choice. He showed me the read-and-forget flag – it was little more than a small dot but was backed up by the full force of federal law. I'm not allowed to enhance the reading experience (such as using glasses that lack copy protection technology) nor reread it. That might explain the lack of libraries and the mandatory newspaper delivery. I could read as much as I want as long as I consumed the book as I read and didn't remember anything. He reminded me that this is for my own good – I don't have to keep track of everything I read or do. They'll

do it for me – if I whistle Happy Birthday© they would automatically add it to my bill.

I glumly finished filling out TSP application forms and provided all the information they asked for. He reminded me that they needed to know the details of my family planning methods in order to be able to forecast future demand and assure that I behaved responsibly. I was uneasy but what choice did I have – all the TSPs used similar forms.

After I signed up with my TSP I asked about getting phone services and an Internet connection.

He looked at me like I was a lunatic. He said he understood charging for something real like a stroll but charging for bits? That's like charging me to use the number 7? How would you even do that? Why would you want to? Next they'll charge me to look at trees by allocating the spectrum – someone is sure to bid on the frequency for green.

He asked how one can measure the value of the exchange of bits. You can't just look at a bit and ask it how valuable it is. It's as if I was charged for looking at the signs across the street. After all, he'll make enough money when I walk to the stores and even more when I come back with valuable purchases.

I embarked on my now purposeful stroll. The intelligent sidewalk made sure I was walking at just the right pace towards the cigarette store (would I have to actually smoke one?). Relieved of the option of finding my own way I was able to start to memorize the TSP brochure that listed exactly what I could want and how much it would cost me.