

Beacon Hill Byline by Rep. Mary Rogeness

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The area code shuffle

If you have friends or relatives in the eastern part of Massachusetts, you may have recently experienced the area code shuffle. That is the experience of calling a familiar phone number and finding that the call does not go through. The area code you have called for many years is suddenly obsolete. Our region was threatened this summer with a similar splintering of our 413 identity, but I am happy to report that the change will not happen.

State regulators have decided that the existing stock of numbers can be conserved and utilized to serve us at least for the near future. I sponsored a resolution, with the support other legislators from the western part of the state, asking for just that result from the regulators, so I'm glad to report their decision.

In one way it would be good for Springfield if we needed the flexibility of new telephone numbers that an area code would supply. Area code proliferation is the result of such factors as population growth, economic growth and expanding uses for telephone numbers. The down side, of course, is the trouble of adapting all systems to the new numbers.

Why does our society need so many more telephone numbers than we had a generation ago? It helps to think of the average family's telephone usage 30 years ago. We probably had more than one phone extension in the house, but there was only one number. Today it is the norm for households to have multiple lines: one for the children or the home office, one for the fax and another for the computer. And that does not even consider the other requirements for numbers. Cell phones and beepers require a whole set of numbers outside of the familiar set of local exchanges, and each of these items takes a bite out of the set of possible numbers.

When area codes began in the 1960s, our state was divided between east (617) and west (413). Here is a review of the changes since that time. The first sign of area code splintering came when 508 was carved out of the 617 region. The Cape and Central Massachusetts were assigned the new identity. Then, two years ago, more codes were added. Boston's northern and western suburbs adopted the 781 or 978 area codes. Through all of this activity, the geographic boundaries of our 413 area code remained unchanged.

Communities around Boston will go through another change next year, but it will not affect existing telephone designations. The new area codes will be "overlays," second options for a single region. The down side for people who live in the area codes is the requirement to dial ten digits to complete local calls. The up side is that nobody is required to change an existing number.

For now, we have the same Springfield identity that we have always had. That is what I requested, and it makes life easier. I must admit, however, that it will be an exciting day for all of the Pioneer Valley when we have absolutely exhausted all of the nine million numbers that come after 413, when we then will require an additional code of our own.