

Daily Southtown

New phone plans ring in New Year savings

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December 27, 2006



After you ring in the New Year next week, take a look at your phone bills because you may be able to ring up some big savings.

Thanks to an agreement negotiated by CUB, AT&T, the Chicago area's dominant local phone company, is offering three new, flat-rate calling packages—dubbed the Consumer's Choice plans—that will save money for most phone users. In fact, if everyone switched to the plan that's best for them, the savings would top \$23 million a year—or \$94 million over the four-year agreement.

CUB has spent a considerable amount of time over the last several years warning consumers to avoid most flat-rate calling packages, so this new message may sound a bit out of tune. But, based on phone company data, it rings true.

Today, a full two-thirds of the company's residential customers have been sold expensive all-you-can-eat packages that include unlimited calling and a host of special features—like Voice Mail, Call Waiting, and others you've probably never heard of. These packages are advertised at one set monthly price—say \$39.99—but end up costing a lot more after fees, surcharges and taxes are tacked on.

The problem is these flat-rate packages don't fit the calling needs of most customers. However, CUB designed the Consumer's Choice plans to match how most people use their phone. In fact, the vast majority of consumers will benefit from switching to either AT&T's standard pay-per-call rates or one of these three packages:

Consumer's Choice Basic: For the hundreds of thousands of customers who don't make a lot of local calls, this no-frills plan covers your monthly line charge—the fee you pay just to have a phone—plus

30 local calls a month. Additional calls cost 6 cents each. The monthly price is \$3.05 for downtown Chicago residents, \$6.03 for those in Chicago's neighborhoods and near suburbs, and \$9.50 in the rest of Illinois.

Consumer's Choice Extra: For customers who want the convenience of unlimited local calling without any bells and whistles. It costs \$10 a month in downtown Chicago, \$13 a month in Chicago's neighborhoods and near suburbs, and \$16 a month in the rest of Illinois.

Consumer's Choice Plus: For customers who want at least two special features, the most popular being Call Waiting and Caller ID. You get unlimited calling plus two extra features of your choice for \$16 a month in downtown Chicago, \$19 a month in Chicago's neighborhoods and near suburbs, and \$21 a month in the rest of the state. Even if you want more than two features, this plan beats all other flat-rate packages we've seen.

So what plan's right for you? First, look at your phone bill. How many local phone calls—roughly 15 miles from your home—do you make and what do you pay for them? Next, decide what special features, if any, you want.

If you're already on a special calling package—like any of the U-Select, Economy Solutions, or Personal Choice plans—you're likely to save by switching to one of the Consumer's Choice plans. Even if you're not on an overpriced package today, you may still save money.

If this all seems too difficult to decipher, CUB has assembled a Phone Cost-cutter's Kit, available at www.citizensutilityboard.org, to help you make the right choice. Plus, our trained phone-bill analysts will even contact AT&T on your behalf. Just call us at 1-866-688-4CUB.

So here's a resolution to help you start the New Year off right: Make the Consumer's Choice. And have a safe and happy holiday!