



Gonzales fought a telecom giant on behalf of small rural cities – and triumphed.

Sara Rubin **Jan 4, 2018** 0



Harold Wolgamott shows the results of a before-and-after internet speed test. He's optimistic quicker service will be a draw for businesses.

Nic Coury

A few months back, the recreation coordinator for the city of Gonzales was searching online for possible new programs to bring to town. One prospective contractor posted a video about their services, but the video was going to take 66 hours to download.

“Who’s going to wait 66 hours to just view the file? No one, so she gives up on the [video],” says Harold Wolgamott, public works director for Gonzales.

That was then. As of Dec. 20, the same video was downloadable in 10 minutes, thanks to a new high-speed internet offering by Charter Communications, which markets its internet and cable services under the brand name Spectrum.

In 2015, Charter Communications was acquiring two competing cable companies, Time Warner Cable and Bright House, in what commentators dubbed a “mega-merger” – big even by the standards of an industry known for mega-deals. After the \$65 billion deal, Charter now rivals the likes of Verizon and AT&T when it comes to internet, serving some 26 million customers.

But the merger required the blessing of the California Public Utilities Commission – and a chance for Gonzales to influence broadband policy. In filed with the CPUC, Charter pledged fast internet – 60 megabits per second – with a critical footnote: “A small portion (less than 1 percent) of New Charter that is not interconnected to the New Charter network may be offered at lower speeds.”

Included in that 1 percent is Gonzales, where maximum speeds were just 5 megabits per second for downloads and 1 Mbps for uploads.

Worried that they, along with the remaining 1 percent of small, rural cities, might get left behind, Gonzales petitioned the CPUC to negotiate as an “intervenor” on behalf on those cities, which gave them leverage with Charter to get a promise of faster internet. The city and company made an agreement that Charter would offer its high-speed options to Gonzales customers by May of 2018 (they launched five months ahead of schedule), and in exchange, Gonzales withdrew from the CPUC proceedings.

“Their national VP flew here and sat and talked with us and agreed to do it,” Wolgamott says. “He agreed they didn’t want us as an obstacle.”

The new service offers speeds of 100 Mbps for download and 60 Mbps for upload, for \$39.99/month – more than a 20-fold increase in speed.

In the course of negotiations, the communities of unincorporated Monterey County and the three other South County cities – Soledad, Greenfield and King City – solicited Charter for quicker speeds. They’re set to get Charter’s faster offering by May of 2019.