

APR 11 1997

ORIGINAL

Decision 97-04-032 April 9, 1997

BEFORE THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

In the Matter of the Application of)
Sierra Telephone Company, Inc,)
(U-1016-C) to restructure intrastate)
rates and charges for telephone)
services furnished within the State)
of California.)

Application 95-12-077
(Filed December 27, 1995)

Order Instituting Investigation into)
the rates, charges, service,)
practices and regulation of Sierra)
Telephone Company, Inc. (U-1016-C).)

I.96-04-018
(Filed April 10, 1996)

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Beck & Ackerman, by Jeffrey F. Beck and Juillisa Bronfman, Attorneys at Law, for CP National, Evans Telephone Company, GTE West Coast Incorporated, Kerman Telephone Co., Pinnacles Telephone Company, The Siskiyou Telephone Company, Tuolumne Telephone Company, and the Volcano Telephone Company; and Barbara Snider Attorney at Law, for Citizens Telecom-Tuolumne and Citizens Telecom-Golden State; interested parties.

James Rood and Laura Tudisco, Attorneys at Law, and Linda Woods and Hal Rayburn, for the Office of Ratepayer Advocates.

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O P I N I O N

Summary

This order requires Sierra Telephone Company, Inc. (applicant) to reduce its intrastate rates by approximately 5.00% or \$1,100,899 in its 1997 test year, effective January 1, 1997. A 10.00% return on rate base found reasonable for applicant produces a 10.94% return on equity when applied to applicant's test year capital structure of 20.69% debt and 79.31% equity.

Applicant is authorized to withdraw its tariff charges for Nonpublished Services; withdraw its Foreign Exchange and Inter-Exchange Receiving Services for which there are no customers; eliminate its 8.57% billing surcharge;¹ grandfather its local loop, and Private Line services; concur in Pacific Bell's 175-T tariff for new customers seeking special access service; reduce its Zone 3 through and including Zone 5 residential 1-Party and universal lifeline reimbursed basic service rates, 1-Party business, key system, PABX, and centrex access lines Zones 1 through and including Zone 5 basic monthly service rates; and change its multi-element service charges, telephone answering service, visit charges and return check charge as summarized in Appendix C to this order. The effect of this rate reduction on the residential 1-Party basic monthly rate is as follows.

¹ This billing surcharge was implemented as part of the Commission's Implementation Rate Design Proceeding (IRD) to replace the "common-pooled" intraLATA billing surcharge and to assist each exchange company in designing company specific rates when it files its next general rate case request.

	<u>Present Monthly Rates</u>	<u>Adopted Monthly Rates</u>	<u>Percent Change in Rates</u>
<u>RESIDENTIAL SERVICE</u>			
1-Party Zone 1	\$16.85	\$16.85	0%
1-Party Zone 2	16.85	16.85	0
1-Party Zone 3	20.30	18.75	-7.6
1-Party Zone 4	24.15	21.25	-12.0
1-Party Zone 5	28.00	23.75	-15.1

Request

This application was made pursuant to the Implementation Rate Design Decision (D) 94-09-065 (56 CPUC2d 117 at 289), which required all small local exchange carriers to submit general rate case filings by December 31, 1995. The order provided applicant with the option of filing for either a traditional general rate case proceeding or an application to adopt a New Regulatory Framework (NRF). Applicant's last general rate case application was issued on June 1, 1983, pursuant to Resolution T-10709.

By its application, applicant sought authority under the traditional general rate proceeding for authority to earn a 12.91% return on its 1997 test year rate base with a 15.00% return on equity. This request would result in an overall decrease of approximately \$500,000 over forecasted intrastate test year revenues at present rates.

Procedural Background

Notice of the application appeared on the Commission's Daily Calendar of December 28, 1995. Letters of protest were received from six customers complaining about applicant's proposal to increase the \$.30 monthly rate for an unlisted number to \$1.00 and the doubling of the \$.50 monthly inside wire maintenance rate to \$1.00.

A prehearing conference (PHC) was held on March 7, 1996, in San Francisco before Commissioner Neeper and Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) Galvin to receive appearances, identify procedural concerns, and to schedule evidentiary hearings.

The hearing schedule agreed to by parties at the PHC did not enable a final order on applicant's request to be issued until after the first quarter of applicant's 1997 test year. Accordingly, all parties agreed that applicant's rates and charges should be subject to refund from January 1, 1997, the beginning of the 1997 test year, through the effective date of rates and charges set by an order in this proceeding. A joint motion of applicant and the Office of Ratepayer Advocates (ORA)² seeking such authorization was filed on March 14, 1996. The PHC procedural schedule and refund procedure agreed to by all parties was approved on May 8, 1996, pursuant to D.96-05-027.

Subsequent to the PHC and prior to the issuance of D.96-05-027, we opened a generic investigation (I.96-04-018) into applicant's rates, charges, service, practices, and regulations and consolidated it with the application. Such an investigation is customary in general rate proceedings to provide a procedural forum and vehicle to fully act on recommendations and other aspects of applicant's operations which may be beyond the confines of the relief requested by applicant in its application.

A duly noticed public participation hearing (PPH) was held before the ALJ in Oakhurst and in Mariposa on October 8, 1996. Two of applicant's customers complimented applicant on its service. No customers spoke in opposition to the application.

An evidentiary hearing was held before Commissioner Neeper and the ALJ in San Francisco on September 12 and 13, 1996. Controller Sharon Carlson, Consulting Manager Earl D. Bishop, Operations Manager David L. Folsom, Financial and Economic Consultant William E. Avera, and Principal Investment Advisor

² By action of the Executive Director, the Commission's Division of Ratepayer Advocates ceased to exist as a staff unit on September 10, 1996. The functions it performed as a participant in this proceeding now resides with the Commission's ORA.

Consultant Michael C. Hadow testified for applicant. Public Utility Regulatory Analyst III Linda J. Woods, Public Utility Regulatory Analyst III Francis W. Fok, and Public Utility Regulatory Analyst III Seaneen Wilson testified for the ORA. Citizens Telecom participated actively in the cost of capital phase of the evidentiary hearing. Twenty-two exhibits were received into evidence during the evidentiary hearing. Opening and reply briefs were received on October 11, 1996 and October 31, 1996, respectively. This proceeding was submitted on October 31, 1996.

Service Area

Applicant operates a 17,500 access-line telephone system within the Counties of Madera and Mariposa covering over 840 square miles which include large portions of the Sierra National Forest and the communities of Oakhurst, Mariposa, Raymond and Bass Lake. Applicant operates two business offices for customer service, one in Oakhurst and one in Mariposa. Applicant furnishes equal access to long distance providers via its digital central office and provides operator services to its customers through its own employees and facilities.

Service Quality

Commission General Order (GO) 133-B sets forth nine service quality standards which applicant must conform to. These reportable standards are Held Primary Orders, Installation-Line Energizing Commitments, Customer Trouble Reports, Dial Tone Speed, Dial Service, Toll Operator Answering Time, Directory Assistance Operator Answering Time, and Business Office Answering Time. Applicant is exempted from the Dial Tone Speed measurement standard because it is not applicable to applicant's digital central office.

Applicant conforms with the GO by compiling a list of its reportable measurements on a monthly basis. Quarterly reports are submitted to the Commission for measurements not meeting or exceeding GO 133-B standards. Any failure to meet a GO 133-B reporting level is an indication of inadequate service.

ORA's review of applicant's reports regarding the eight applicable service quality standards found no anomalies. ORA also reviewed applicant's customer complaint files and verified records to the Commission's Consumer Affairs Division for the past three years. No formal complaints were filed with the Commission during this time period. Additionally, very few informal complaints related to applicant were handled by the Commission within the last three years. We find that applicant's service quality is reasonable.

Affiliated Interest

ORA's review of applicant's operations with its parent company, Sierra Tel Tronics, disclosed that applicant included \$23,117 of aircraft expense in its 1995 plant specific expense for a fully depreciated 1976 Smith Aerostar 601P propeller aircraft and related equipment which applicant intends to transfer to its parent company. However, since the aircraft expense was excluded by both applicant and ORA in estimating 1997 test year plant specific expenses, no adjustment to the test year plant specific estimate is warranted. ORA does recommend that, because the aircraft was included in rate base, applicant must file an application for authority to transfer the aircraft pursuant to Public Utilities (PU) Code § 851.

PU Code § 851 requires applicant to obtain Commission authority to sell, lease, or assign utility property necessary in the performance of its duties to the public. However, upon examination, applicant explained that although the aircraft, fully depreciated and valued at approximately \$100,000, was recorded as utility plant in service by applicant, the aircraft was never used for ratemaking or settlement purposes. Further, the aircraft was subsequently transferred to its parent company in 1995 as a dividend and not included in applicant's 1997 test year rate base estimate.

In its opening brief, ORA recommends that applicant be required to provide ORA with documentation supporting applicant's contention that the aircraft was never in rate base. Absent such documentation, ORA recommends that applicant be required to file an application for authority to transfer the aircraft, pursuant to PU Code § 851. However, applicant's witness provided undisputed testimony under examination on the details of the aircraft and exclusion of its costs from rate base and operating expense recovery. ORA had ample opportunity to examine applicant's witness on this issue and to refute its testimony. However, ORA chose not to pursue this issue. There is no reason to prolong this issue. Since there is no basis to believe that applicant's ratepayers have compensated applicant for any costs related to the aircraft or that the aircraft is necessary in the performance of applicant's public utility service, we will deny ORA's request for applicant to provide ORA additional information of this issue or to file an application under PU Code § 851.

Results of Operations

Applicant provides both intrastate and interstate telecommunications services, subject to the regulation of the Commission and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), respectively. Since applicant's operations serve both jurisdictions, applicant must allocate its operating revenues, expenses, taxes, and investments between interstate and intrastate operations.

The FCC's Part 36 Separations Manual prescribes the basic principle and procedures for the separation of applicant's interstate operations from its total operations. For the purpose of this proceeding, applicant used separations factors from its 1993 cost studies. ORA reviewed these separations factors and found them reasonable for this proceeding. Hence, both applicant and ORA used identical separations factors to arrive at a 1997 test year intrastate results of operations.

Applicant's forecasted 1997 intrastate results of operations produced a 12.91% return at present rates. The ORA forecasted a comparable 1997 intrastate results of operations based on its analysis of applicant's operations. ORA's forecasted results of applicant's operations produced a 12.44% intrastate return on average 1997 rate base at present rates. The 0.47% difference in return on average rate base between applicant and ORA resulted from the use of different operating revenues, operating expenses, and rate base estimates.

Applicant's \$23,931,965 intrastate operating revenue estimate at present rates was \$2,619,704 higher than ORA's \$21,312,261 estimate. The difference in estimates occurred in forecasting local, access, and toll revenues. Differences in local revenues resulted from applicant and ORA applying the USF revenue differently to the test year forecast. Differences between access and toll revenues resulted from the forecast of different expense and rate base estimates, tax rates, and returns from the access and toll pools. Applicant forecasted a 2.32% access pool return and a 4.20% toll pool return compared to ORA's 3.81% and 5.71%, respectively.

Applicant's \$15,094,405 intrastate operating expense estimate at present rates was \$1,588,398 higher than ORA's \$13,506,007 estimate. This difference in operating expense is attributed to the use of different forecasting methods. Applicant used a historical trend method based on recorded 1990 through 1994 and six months of 1995 actual expenses. ORA used a constant dollar method which converted a three-year average from 1993 through 1995 to an inflation adjusted base.

Applicant's \$44,347,574 average intrastate rate base at present rates was \$6,860,229 higher than ORA's \$37,487,345 estimate. This difference in rate base estimates is primarily attributable to ORA using a more recent schedule of plant expansion and construction than originally planned by applicant and ORA's use

of the full year 1995 actual data. The remaining differences in Working Cash and Deferred Taxes were affected by the parties' different estimates for test year revenues and expenses.

At the conclusion of the evidentiary hearing, applicant and ORA sponsored a joint exhibit, post-hearing Exhibit 421, setting forth in tabular form applicant's and ORA's agreed upon version of the differences between their test year intrastate results of operations, resulting in a 11.75% return on intrastate rate base at present rates. Such an agreement resulted from the parties' individual analyses of each other's evidence presented at the hearings and their desire to limit the number of issues to be adjudicated. No opposition to the late-filed exhibit was received.

In sponsoring the joint exhibit, applicant and ORA do not necessarily agree to the methodology used by either party to develop their respective results and do not intend for the joint exhibit to constitute a precedent to be used in any pending or future rate case proceeding before the Commission.

Appendix A to this order sets forth a comparison of applicant's 1997 intrastate results of operations at present rates as testified to by ORA and by applicant, and as subsequently agreed to by ORA and applicant. The agreed-upon results of operations between ORA and applicant result in a recommended \$1,730,000 decrease and \$730,846 increase by ORA and applicant, respectively.

Net-to-Gross Multiplier

A net-to-gross multiplier is a tax adjustment constant which, when multiplied by a specific change in applicant's net revenue, provides the necessary change in applicant's gross revenue requirement to reflect changes in net revenue and those expenses and taxes which vary with income.

ORA recommended that a 1.76023 net-to-gross multiplier be adopted for the test year. However, it excluded the state income tax allowance from calculating the federal income tax component of the multiplier. State income tax expense is deductible from income

when calculating federal income tax expense. ORA relied on D.89-11-058 (33 CPUC2d 495 at 506), which requires the federal income tax expense calculation to utilize the prior year's, not current year's, state income tax expense. This is because the Internal Revenue Service allows for the prior year's state income tax expense to be deducted from income to arrive at the current year's federal income tax expense.

ORA did not apply the flow-through method of accounting for state income tax on a consistent basis. Unlike its exclusion of state income tax from the federal income tax component of the net-to-gross multiplier, ORA used its state income tax expense as a deduction from income to calculate its allowable test year federal income tax expense.

ORA, recognizing that its application of state income tax to derive the federal income tax expense component of the net-to-gross multiplier was inconsistent with the methods adopted in D.95-11-024, Citizens Utilities Company of California's (Citizens), and D.96-12-074, Roseville Telephone Company's (Roseville) general rate cases, corrected its method and revised its net-to-gross multiplier from 1.76023 to 1.67229. ORA's method is now consistent with its test year federal income tax estimate and with the method adopted in Citizens' and Roseville's general rate proceedings. Applicant also concurs with the revised net-to-gross multiplier.

As recognized in D.96-12-074, the preparation of a results of operations for one test year is a major undertaking. The preparation of the results of operations for the year prior to the test year is likewise no small task. Recognizing these differences, the consistency with the method used in Citizens' and Roseville's recent general rate cases, and applicant's concurrence, ORA's revised net-to-gross multiplier of 1.67229 should be adopted. We adopt the revised net-to-gross multiplier of 1.67229

as derived in the following mathematical calculation. Gross revenues will require a \$1,672 change for every \$1,000 change in net revenue.

Gross Revenue Change	1.00000
Less Uncollectibles @.611%	<u>.00611</u>
	.99389
Less State Income Tax @ 8.84%	<u>.08786</u>
	.90603
Less Federal Income Tax @ 34.00%	<u>.30805</u>
Net Income	.59798

Net-to-Gross Multiplier
 (Gross Revenue Change/Net Income) 1.67229
 =====

Capital Structure

Applicant proposes a projected capital structure of 20.69% debt and 79.31% equity for its 1997 test year, which does not substantially deviate from its 1996 projected capital structure. Applicant's witness testified that it is generally accepted that the norms established by comparable firms provide a valid benchmark against which to evaluate the reasonableness of a utility's capital structure. The capital structures maintained by similar companies should reflect their collective efforts to finance themselves so as to minimize capital costs while preserving their financial integrity and ability to attract capital. Hence, applicant compiled a group of ten publicly traded small independent telephone companies to arrive at a reasonable capital structure for applicant.

The average capital structure of applicant's ten comparable small independent companies consisted of approximately 21% debt and 79% equity. Applicant acknowledged that its comparable companies were not perfectly comparable to applicant,

and concluded that a reasonable capital structure for a small telephone company is between 60% and 80% equity. Such an equity range provides applicant the opportunity to preserve its borrowing capacity so that it will have ready and continuous access to adequate capital to meet its service requirements to customers.

Similarly, ORA compiled a group of publicly traded companies to test the reasonableness of applicant's capital structure. ORA's comparable group of companies produced a 51% average equity ratio for 1995. As a reality check, ORA calculated the 1994 and 1995 average common equity for California's 18 small independent telephone companies. This secondary analysis showed an average common equity ratio of 70.3% for 1994 and 75.9% for 1995. Given that applicant's proposed capital structure was within a reasonable range of the California small telephone companies' average common equity ratio, ORA agreed to the proposed capital structure.

Although applicant's comparable group of companies is more comparable to applicant than ORA's, which included Pacific Telesis and Bell Atlantic, applicant's comparable group is not truly comparable. For example, applicant included Roseville in its comparable analysis which, when compared to applicant in terms of total rate base, shows that applicant's adopted rate base is less than 20% of Roseville's total rate base (D.96-12-074).

For a comparative analysis to produce meaningful results, it is essential that the companies in the comparable group be truly comparable to applicant. However, this is not practical in this case because of applicant's small size compared to other small publicly traded companies. Nevertheless, it is necessary to establish a reasonable range of equity ratios for applicant. Upon our analyses of the 1994 and 1995 average common equity for California's 18 small independent telephone companies and evaluation of a higher equity ratio trend for smaller companies, as demonstrated by comparing the results of ORA's large comparable

companies to applicant's mid-size comparable companies analyses, we concur with applicant's assessment that a reasonable range of common equity for small telephone companies, such as applicant, is between 60% and 80%.

In setting returns for large and mid size telephone companies, we have traditionally imputed a capital structure where we believe a utility's actual equity ratio is too high or too low. This is because a utility's capital ratio affects its equity return, the more equity in the capital structure, the lower the return. This is logical because the more equity in a capital structure, the lower the risk is to shareholders. If the utility wishes to increase its equity return, it may do so by issuing lower-cost long-term debt.

Consistent with our treatment of cost of capital for large and mid size telecommunications companies as an incentive for applicant to manage its own capital structure, and we decline to adopt a specific capital structure. However, we do find that applicant's proposed common equity rate is within the reasonable range of common equity for small telephone companies.

Cost of Debt

The cost of long-term debt consists of interest and issuance expenses of all long-term bonds and notes issued by applicant, both currently outstanding and projected to be issued during the test year. Since applicant does not plan on issuing any new debt during the test year, it used its 4.90% embedded cost of debt. ORA calculated applicant's embedded cost of debt to be 6.36%. This 1.46% difference between applicant and ORA resulted from ORA excluding Rural Telephone Bank (RTB) stock applicant was required to purchase as a condition to borrow from the RTB, and ORA's more precise method of calculating the composite cost of debt. Applicant concurs with ORA's calculation. We find that the test year 6.36% cost of long-term debt calculated by ORA is reasonable.

Cost of Capital

Applicant requests a 12.91% overall rate base return with a resulting 15.00% return on equity. This rate base return is 3.91% higher than ORA's recommended 9.00%, which produces a resulting 10.31% equity return. Both applicant and ORA supported their equity returns with Discounted Cash Flow (DCF), Capital Asset Pricing Model (CAPM), and risk premium (RPM) analyses. Each of these analyses was used to estimate the investor's required return for equity investments.

The DCF analysis employs the concept of presenting the price of common stocks equal to the present value of the cash flows investors expect to receive from owning the common stocks. The discount rate at which investors discount future cash flows to present value is equal to the cost of capital. The CAPM analysis employs the concept that there is a positive and linear relationship between risk and return. CAPM assumes that an investor's expected return on equity is proportional to what the investor expects to receive on a risk-free security plus a risk premium related to the inherent risk of the investment. The RPM analyses recognizes differences in the risk and return requirements for investors holding common stocks as compared to bonds. The RPM analyses are based on the principal that common stock investments are riskier than long-term debt instruments.

Applicant's Position

Since applicant's stock is not publicly traded, there is no share price data to directly calculate applicant's equity return under the DCF method. Therefore, applicant applied the DCF method to two groups of large telecommunications companies. The first group consisted of eight independent telecommunications companies and the second group consisted of seven regional holding companies (RHCs), previously part of AT&T.

Applicant's estimate under 16 separate constant growth variations of the DCF analysis resulted in an equity cost range

from 8.01% to 18.29% and from 1.58% to 14.04% for the independent group and RHCs, respectively. Based on applicant's judgment of risk these telecommunications companies face, it rejected all equity cost below 10.00% and above 14.00% as being implausible values. This left five estimates ranging from 10.73% to 13.56% for the independents and four ranging from 11.01% to 13.73% for the RHCs.

To reflect the increasingly competitive nature of the telecommunications industry, applicant conducted a nonconstant growth DCF analysis. This application of the DCF analysis produced a equity cost range from 10.60% to 40.08% and from 6.40% to 14.10% for the independent group and RHCs, respectively. The average equity cost was 18.80% and 11.80% for the independent group and the RHCs, respectively.

Applicant employed a third variation of the DCF analysis by using its nonconstant results to impute future prices based on projected internal growth. This DCF method produced an equity cost range from 8.80% to 15.70% and from 10.10% to 15.60% for the independent group and the RHCs, respectively. The average equity cost was 13.30% and 12.80% for the independent group and RHCs, respectively.

Applicant summarizes these results to suggest that a reasonable equity cost range under the constant method is 11.50% to 12.50% and under the non-constant and imputed future price variation is 12.00% to 13.00%. Taken together, applicant concludes that its DCF analyses indicates a reasonable DCF equity cost range for large telecommunications firms to be between 11.75% and 12.75%.

For its CAPM analysis, applicant reviewed the comparable returns realized on long-term treasury bonds and the stocks in the S&P's 500 from 1926 to 1994. The risk premium difference in the return on the stock portfolio and the bonds over this time period was between 5.4 and 7.0 percentage points, depending on whether the average equity risk premium is calculated under the geometric or

arithmetic mean. The mid point of these two numbers was multiplied by the published beta for each of the two groups producing a 5.77% and 4.53% risk premium. These results were then added to the November 1995 long-term government bond rate of 6.26%, resulting in a 12.03% and 10.79% equity cost for the independent companies and RHCs, respectively.

Applicant's RPM analysis estimated the risk premium by applying the historical realized rate of return approach directly to the telephone companies as well as on allowed rates of common equity returns. Over a ten year time period from 1985 to 1995, the realized rates of return for telephone companies exceeded those on utility bonds by an average of 4.59% and 5.43%, depending on whether a geometric or arithmetic mean is used. The 5.01% midpoint of these equity risk premiums for single A bond rated independent companies was added to the November 1995 single A public utility bonds 7.43 average yield resulting in a 12.44% equity cost for the Independents. The same method was used to calculate a 12.23% RHC equity cost, except that double A data was used in place of single A to reflect the RHCs double A bond ratings.

Applicant adjusted its RPM to reflect an inverse relationship between interest rates and equity risk. This is because when interest rates are high, equity risk narrows, and when interest rates are relatively low, equity risks are greater. A regression equation between interest rates and equity risk was used to reflect this inverse relationship, resulting in a 12.19% and 11.98% equity cost for its independent and RHC study group, respectively.

Applicant concludes from its DCF, CAPM, and RPM analyses that a reasonable equity cost for large telecommunications firms is 12.00%, based on an overall range of 11.50% to 12.50%. Applicant then applied a 360 basis point premium to the 12.00% equity cost to arrive at a 15.60% equity cost for small telephone companies, such

as applicant. This 30% premium was derived from the mid-point of financial data for publicly traded companies and implied that small firms' equity costs exceed large firms by 200 to 520 basis points. It was used to reflect applicant's greater risk due to its small size and lack of liquidity.

Applicant, ignoring size differences, believes a 50% premium for the non-marketability of the common stock in a privately-held telephone company implies a cost of equity on the order of at least 17%. Applicant concluded that the reflection of both the small size and illiquidity of its stock together suggest an even higher cost of equity. Hence, it proposed a 15% return on equity as reasonable, and if anything conservative.

ORA's Position

ORA's comparable group of companies for use in its DCF analysis consisted of large telecommunications companies which, among other items, had combined local, toll, and access revenues consisting of more than 50% of total revenues in 1995. This consisted of 11 large telecommunications companies, all of which were included in applicant's comparable companies. The only differences between ORA's and applicant's companies is that applicant used four additional companies and split the companies into two groups between independents and RHCs.

ORA employed a three- and five-year growth projection in its DCF analysis to reflect its view that the telephone industry is changing at a pace faster than in previous decades. To arrive at its dividend growth rate, ORA relied on both historical and forecasted rates for the comparable companies. The historical and forecasted earnings growth ranged from 5.08% to 10.95%, while its sustainable growth rate for the comparable companies averaged 5.85% for the past three years and 5.03% for the past five years, respectively. Using subjective judgment, ORA concluded that the comparable companies will experience a 5.50% to 6.00% long-term dividend growth rate. When dividend growth range is applied to the

current three-month average dividend yield of ORA's comparable companies, it supports an equity return range of 9.86% to 10.38%. When applied to the average six-month dividend yield, it supports an equity return range of 9.76% to 10.28%.

For its CAPM analysis, ORA used the comparable companies average beta risk factor, forecasted interest rates, and historical intermediate and long-term market risk premiums for the time period from 1926 to 1994. ORA's analysis supports a 12.31% and 12.56% equity return based on the five-year treasuries, and 30-year treasuries, respectively.

ORA's RPM analysis shows the existence of a 1.78% average risk premium when its comparable companies are compared to 30-year treasury bond yields and .90% when compared to double A utility bonds. The adding of these average risk premiums to ORA's forecasted 6.82% interest rate and 7.74% double A utility bonds results in a 8.60% and 8.64% equity return, respectively.

Based on its DCF, CAPM, and RPM, ORA believes that investors currently require common equity returns within a range of 8.60% to 12.56% for applicant. This range consists of the lowest and highest equity return as derived from its various analyses.

ORA declined to recommend a specific equity return. This is consistent with recent mid-size telephone companies' rate case proceedings in which the Commission opted not to adopt a specific equity return as an incentive for the utilities to manage their capital structures. However, based upon its analysis of several factors including applicant's low financial risk, ORA concluded that a 10.30% equity return is a reasonable return to consider in arriving at a rate base return. The factors weighed by ORA included applicant's past five years' performance of actual rates of return and of financial ratios, continuance of cost recovery mechanisms, generation of internal capital, competition, potential delay in competition for small telephone companies, continued rate-base regulation, lower current and forecasted interest rates than

when applicant was last authorized a return on equity and rate base.

ORA applied this 10.30% equity return to the average 75% equity and 25% debt capital structure, derived from its analysis of California small telephone companies, to develop a range of returns on rate base for the five small telephone companies (California-Oregon, Calaveras, Ducor, Sierra, and Foresthill) that filed a general rate proceeding in December, 1995. This analysis resulted in a range of return on rate base from 8.58% to 9.32%, which averaged 8.99%. Based on this analysis, and ORA's review of the risks faced by small telephone companies, ORA recommended a 9.00% return on rate base be adopted for applicant.

Discussion

We have consistently found in recent years that the DCF, CAPM, and RPM models used by the parties in general rate proceedings offer guidance to our determination of appropriate rates of return. However, because these models are necessarily dependent on subjective inputs, there are variations in their results and they do not provide absolute answers to questions regarding appropriate capital costs. We reaffirmed this view in D.89-10-031 (33 CPUC2d 43 (1989)), which established rates of return for GTE California, Inc. and Pacific Bell, noting that we continue to view these models with considerable skepticism. Consistent with our past application of financial models in determining capital costs, we will consider the models put forth by the parties, but use our judgment in determining the appropriate capital costs for applicant.

By D.89-10-031, we also stated our view that adopting a return on rate base without reference to an adopted capital structure provides the utility with an incentive to manage its capital structure efficiently. We will also apply this principle to applicant. This will provide applicant with the flexibility to increase or decrease its equity return through management of its

debt cost and capital structuring while maintaining a reasonable return on rate base. Therefore, we decline to adopt a specific equity return and will focus instead on an appropriate return on rate base.

The adopted return on rate base, consistent with the Federal Power Commission v. Hope Natural Gas Company, 320 U.S. 591 (1944), must provide applicant's investors an opportunity to earn a equity return equivalent to returns on alternative investments in other firms with comparable risk. Hence, we scrutinized applicant's and ORA's financial and risk analyses to derive a benchmark range of reasonable equity returns for applicant, as a small telephone company, which will provide applicant's investors an equity return commensurable with alternative investments.

Our scrutiny of the financial models in this proceeding shows that applicant's 76.80% actual and 79.31% imputed test year equity ratios are much higher than applicant's and ORA's comparable companies' 51% average equity ratio. This indicates that applicant's financial risk is lower than that of comparable companies in applicant's and ORA's financial analyses due to less leveraged capital.

Applicant's risk is also mitigated when compared to the study-group companies because of applicant's choice to continue with traditional rate-base regulation instead of opting for the new incentive rate regulation, as well as continued participation in revenue recovery pools, such as the California High Cost Fund and various settlement pools.

We observe that applicant's risk is further mitigated through its plan to not raise any significant amount of capital during the test year. We note that applicant's 20.62 times average pretax interest coverage for the past five years exceeds Standard & Poor's 4.5 times pretax interest coverage benchmark for a double A debt rating.

We also observe that ORA's DCF and RPM analyses are based on a combination of historical and forecasted growth rates to mitigate the inability of forecasted growth rates to track with actual growth rates. This contrasts with applicant's reliance on only forecasted rates. ORA used all of its economic data results from its study group to arrive at an equity range in its DCF analysis. Applicant, however, excluded two-thirds of its own economic data results from its constant growth DCF analyses as being illogical since it produced results with equity returns below 10.00% and above 14.00%. In addition, ORA's CAPM analyses is based on the arithmetic mean of stock market data as compared to applicant's use of arithmetic and geometric mean. Such differences support the theory that subjectivity is used in the financial models to identify alternative investments to equity returns and that model results need to be scrutinized.

Both ORA's and applicant's study groups consisted of large telecommunications companies. All 11 companies included in ORA's study group were also included in applicant's group of 15 companies. Although applicant increased its calculated alternative investments equity returns by 30% to reflect the difference in size and liquidity between the study group of large companies and applicant's small size, ORA did not make any such adjustment. We do not necessarily concur with applicant's 30% risk premium to compensate applicant for its small size as compared to the large companies in the study group. However, we do concur that applicant's risk is impacted by its small size in relation to the large size of the companies in the study group.

Local competition also must be considered and weighed carefully. Such competition may come from a multitude of telecommunications providers such as wireless carriers, cable service providers, and competitive local carriers. Cellular carriers, being in existence since the late 1980's, should be considered a mitigated risk since there is no evidence that

applicant has been adversely impacted by these carriers from the start of their operations. On the other side, cable companies and other wireless service providers such as personal communications services carriers are new to the local exchange arena. Although there was no evidence presented to demonstrate that these entities have impacted applicant's operations, they have the potential to impact applicant's operations. In addition, competitive local carriers may opt to compete with applicant if applicant does not obtain a local competition exemption from the Federal Communications Commission. Hence, the potential competition from cable companies, wireless service providers, and competitive local carriers increases small telephone companies' risk, which, in this case, is somewhat mitigated by applicant's sparsely populated rural terrain and reliable service.

Finally, we observe that interest rates are again on the rise. The 7.37% cost of 30-year treasury bonds in 1994 decreased to 6.88% in 1995, but began turning around in 1996 at 6.89% and was projected to increase to 7.02% for the test year. Accordingly, our determination of a reasonable range of equity returns for alternative investments will reflect this increased-interest-rate trend.

Although ORA concluded that investors would require a 8.60% to 12.56% equity return range to invest in alternative investments it chose to recommend the 10.30% mid point of its equity range. Similarly, applicant selected the mid point of its equity range. We find that the selection of a specific equity rate provides less flexibility for applicant to manage its equity return than we would like. Hence, we opt for a range of reasonableness.

Upon consideration, evaluation, and weighting of applicant's and ORA's financial and risk analyses with the above-mentioned observations of mitigated and increased risks, we find that a reasonable equity range for small telephone companies, such as applicant, should be 10.10% to 14.06%. This range is derived by

applying a 150 basis point increased risk factor to the low and high ends of ORA's recommended 8.60% to 12.56% equity range. It is also approximately 150 basis points above the upper range of applicant's 11.50% to 12.50% equity range prior to its addition of a risk premium for small telephone companies.

With the above ranges of equity ratios and return on equity for small telephone companies, applicant's adopted return on rate base should be set to provide it with an equity return that falls within the small telephone companies' equity ratio range. In other words, an equity ratio at the bottom of the 60% to 80% small-telephone-companies' equity ratio range should compensate a utility at the upper end of the 10.10% to 14.06% small telephone companies' equity return range. Conversely, an equity ratio at the top of the small telephone companies' equity ratio range should be compensated at the low end of the small telephone companies' equity return range. This is because equity ratios at the lower end of the range require a higher equity return to compensate shareholders for increased risk.

Applicant's requested 12.91% return on rate base applied to its 79.31% equity ratio results in a 14.60% return on equity, approximately 54 basis points above the top range of the equity return range for small telephone companies with 60% equity. We decline to adopt applicant's proposed return on equity for this reason.

ORA's 9.00% recommended return on rate base provides shareholders with a 9.68% equity return, below the small telephone companies' equity range and does not adequately compensate shareholders for their risk. We also decline to adopt ORA's recommended return on equity for this latter reason. Applicant's equity ratio requires an equity return within the 10.10% to 11.00% range based on the reasonable ranges of equity ratios and return on equity. We find that a 10.00% return on rate base resulting in a 10.94% return on equity will adequately compensate shareholders for

their risk and is fair and reasonable to ratepayers and shareholders.

This return on rate base applied to the mid point of the 60% to 80% common equity range found reasonable for small telephone companies results in a 11.56% equity return, as shown in the following tabulation, and is well within the equity return range found reasonable for small telephone utilities in this proceeding.

	<u>Ratio</u>	<u>Cost</u>	<u>Weighted Cost</u>
Long-Term Debt	30.00%	6.36%	1.91%
Equity	70.00	11.56	8.09
Total	100.00%		10.00%

The application of this 10.00% authorized return on rate base to applicant's proposed capital structure found reasonable in this proceeding results in a 10.94% equity return, within the lower side of the reasonable range of common equity for small telephone companies. This is because applicant has minimal leverage of debt which results in less risk to applicant's investors. Applicant has the flexibility to increase or decrease its equity return through management of its debt cost and equity ratio. The following tabulation reflects applicant's capital structure with the adopted 10.00% return on rate base.

	<u>Ratio</u>	<u>Cost</u>	<u>Weighted Cost</u>
Long-Term Debt	20.69%	6.36%	1.32%
Equity	79.31	10.94	8.68
Total	100.00%		10.00%

Summary of Earnings

The Commission is not obligated to accept applicant's and ORA's agreed-upon separated results of operations at present rates, as summarized in Appendix A. However, upon evaluation of the evidentiary record in this proceeding and consideration of the specific explanations for disagreements between ORA and applicant, we conclude that the adopted intrastate results of operations absent such an agreement would be nominally different. For

example, applicant and ORA provided persuasive testimony why each other's revenue estimates for access and pool rates of return should not be adopted. By the joint exhibit, applicant and ORA have agreed upon a 3.32% and 5.20% rate of return for access and toll revenue, respectively. The agreed-upon returns are the approximate returns we would adopt if not for the agreement. It is for this reason that we adopt applicant's and ORA's joint intrastate results of operations for the 1997 test year at present rates.

Our adopted 1997 intrastate results of operations at present rates is \$21,682,403 in revenues, \$14,416,223 in expenses, \$2,843,771 in taxes, \$4,422,409 in net operating revenue, and \$37,640,911 in average rate base. This produces a 11.75% rate-base return at present rates.

A gross revenue requirement decrease of \$1,100,899 is required to produce the 10.00% adopted test year rate of return found reasonable for applicant. Appendix B to this order sets forth applicant's adopted results of operations at present and proposed rates.

Rate Design

After the total revenue requirement is determined in a rate proceeding, there still remains the need to distribute that revenue requirement among the various components of applicant's rate structure.

Applicant proposed to eliminate its 8.57% surcharge, Foreign Exchange Service and interexchange receiving services for which there are no customers, grandfather private line services and concur in the Pacific Bell 175-T tariff for all new customers seeking local or intrastate interexchange special access services; reestablish a premises visit charge and institute a separate service order charge for changes and/or additions to existing service, record changes, directory changes, and voice mail

installations; and to increase other charges to make them comparable to those of other utilities.

Subsequently, applicant modified its rate design proposal to reflect the impact of applicant's and ORA's agreed upon test year results of operations which, if applicant's rate base request was adopted, would result in a rate increase instead of its expected rate decrease request. Applicant requests that, irrespective of any rate reduction, its rate design proposal, other than the 8.57% surcharge, which creates a negligible revenue impact, should still be adopted. It also requests that if any rate reduction is adopted, that such reduction should be used to reduce or eliminate the 8.57% surcharge.

ORA concurs with applicant's proposal to apply rate reductions against applicant's existing 8.57% surcharge. However, ORA recommends that any remaining revenue requirement reduction be used to decrease business and residential individual and party line services and Digital Centrex Service rates on a proportionate basis.

Subsequent to the closing of the evidentiary hearing, Senate Bill 1035 (Chapter 675) was enacted effective January, 1997. This Senate Bill, which among other matters, amends PU Code § 2893 to prohibit telephone corporations, including applicant, from charging any of its customers for having an unlisted or unpublished telephone number. Such telephone services shall continue to be free until local telephone service becomes competitive. The Commission is required to implement this change on a revenue neutral basis, and not eliminate any such charges prior to the effective date upon which offsetting rates are implemented by the Commission.

Neither applicant nor ORA had an opportunity to comment on the impact PU Code § 2893 has on applicant's rate design. However, this application does address applicant's rate design and, absent the reopening of this proceeding or the opening of a

generic proceeding to implement Senate Bill 1035, it is unknown when applicant's next rate review will occur. Accordingly, the assigned ALJ recommended in his proposed decision that the tariff charges for unlisted and unpublished telephones be withdrawn by this order and that applicant maintain revenue neutrality for the \$18,546 test year revenue generated by such services through a reduction in the overall revenue decrease being required by this order. All parties were provided an opportunity to comment on this proposal in their respective comments on the ALJ's proposed decision.

The rate reduction being ordered by this order should be applied first to make applicant whole for its loss of unpublished and unlisted telephone service revenue, and second to reduce the 8.57% surcharge, a matter on which both applicant and ORA concur. The withdrawal of these two categories utilizes \$608,874 of the \$1,100,899 revenue reduction, with a \$492,025 reduction remaining to be spread over applicant's other tariffed charges and services.

Applicant recommends that its \$16.85 monthly rate for Zone 1 residential basic service remain at that level. ORA recommends it be reduced by \$5.10 to \$11.75 a month. Applicant wants this rate to remain constant so that it may readily access the CHCF as an external funding source should it need future revenue recovery. Any reduction in this rate will require applicant to return to the current \$16.85 rate prior to accessing CHCF funds. Applicant recommends that if it is necessary to go beyond elimination of the 8.57% surcharge, that residential monthly rates in Zone 2 through 5 be reduced by more than proposed by ORA.

We observed in the Universal Service Order (D.96-10-066) that, except for the one-time recovery of 1995 "IRD" impacts, draws from the CHCF-A have not been significant and that the small independent telephone companies, including applicant, do not anticipate that draws from the CHCF-A under the current rules will be significant. Applicant explains that the telecommunications

industry changes taking place at the state and federal level may require applicant to access the CHCF-A in the near future.

Given the magnitude of the rate reduction being authorized and our desire to eliminate the current surcharge and to withdraw nonpublished tariff rates, it is reasonable to adopt ORA's rate design proposals for tariffed services other than the residential and business basic services and return check charge. Hence, the current \$16.85 residential monthly basic rate for Zone 1 and Zone 2 should remain constant. However, in so doing, we observe that applicant's continued ability to access the CHCF further mitigates the risk of its investors. The remaining unspread revenue reduction should be applied to reduce applicant's 1-Party residential Zone 3, 4, and 5, and business monthly tariff rates on a proportionate basis as listed in Appendix C to this order, a summary of the rate changes we adopt.

Section 311 Comments

The ALJ's proposed decision on this matter was filed with the Docket Office and mailed to all parties of record on March 7, 1997, pursuant to Section 311 of the PU Code. Comments and reply comments to the ALJ's proposed order were timely received from applicant and ORA.

Rule 77.3 of the Commission's Rules of Practice and Procedure specifically requires Section 311 comments to focus on factual, legal, or technical errors in the Proposed Decision and in citing such errors requires the party to make specific references to the record. Comments which merely reargue positions taken in briefs accord no weight and are not to be filed. New factual information, untested by cross-examination, must not be included in comments and must not be relied on as the basis for assertions made in post publication comments. Rule 77.4 requires comments proposing specific changes to the Proposed Decision to include supporting findings of fact and conclusions of law.

We have carefully reviewed the comments filed by the parties to this proceeding that complied with Rule 77.3 and to the extent that such comments required discussion or changes to the Proposed Decision, the discussion or changes have been incorporated into the body of this order. Comments which have not complied with Rule 77.3 were not considered.

Findings of Fact

1. Applicant sought authority under a traditional general rate proceeding to earn a 12.91% return on its 1997 test year rate base with a 15.00% return on equity producing an overall decrease of approximately \$500,000 over forecasted separated intrastate test year revenues at present rates.

2. Notice of the application appeared on the Commission's Daily Calendar of December 28, 1995.

3. D.96-05-027 approved the parties' agreement that applicant's rates and charges should be subject to refund from January 1, 1997, the beginning of the 1997 test year, through the effective date of the rates and charges set by an order in this proceeding.

4. A generic investigation (I.96-04-018) into applicant's rates, charges, service, practices, and regulations was consolidated with this application.

5. A duly noticed PPH was held in Oakhurst and in Mariposa on October 8, 1996.

6. No customer spoke in opposition to the application at the PPH.

7. An evidentiary hearing was held in San Francisco on September 12 and 13, 1996.

8. PU Code § 851 requires applicant to obtain Commission authority to sell, lease, or assign utility property necessary or useful in the performance of its duties to the public.

9. An aircraft, fully depreciated and valued at approximately \$100,000, recorded as utility plant in service, was never used for ratemaking or settlement purposes.

10. Applicant's aircraft was subsequently transferred to its parent company as a dividend and not included in applicant's test-year rate-base or expense estimates.

11. Applicant's service quality is reasonable.

12. Applicant's forecasted 1997 intrastate results of operations produced a 12.91% return at present rates as compared to ORA's forecasted results of applicant's operations which produced 12.44%.

13. Applicant and ORA sponsored a joint exhibit setting forth applicant's and ORA's agreed-upon version of the differences between their test year intrastate results of operations, resulting in a 11.75% return on intrastate rate base at present rates.

14. No opposition to the jointly filed exhibit was received.

15. In sponsoring the joint exhibit, applicant and ORA do not necessarily agree to the methodology used by either party to develop their respective results and do not intend for the joint exhibit to constitute a precedent to be used in any other rate case or proceeding pending or which may be filed in the future before the Commission.

16. The agreed-upon results of operations at present rates between ORA and applicant result in a recommended rate decrease of \$1,730,000 and \$730,846 by ORA and applicant, respectively.

17. ORA excluded the state income tax allowance in calculating the federal income tax component of its 1.76023 net-to-gross multiplier.

18. State income tax expense is deductible from income when calculating federal income tax expense.

19. D.89-11-058 requires the test year federal income tax expense calculation to utilize the prior year's, not current year's, state income tax expense.

20. ORA used its intrastate test year state income tax expense as a deduction to calculate its test year federal income tax expense.

21. ORA revised its net-to-gross multiplier from 1.76023 to 1.67229 to bring its net-to-gross method into conformance with its test year federal income tax estimate for this proceeding, consistent with the method adopted in Citizens' and Roseville's general rate proceedings.

22. Applicant concurs with ORA's revised net-to-gross multiplier.

23. Applicant proposes a projected capital structure of 20.69% debt and 79.31% equity for its test year.

24. Applicant concludes that a reasonable capital structure for a small telephone company is between 60% and 80% equity.

25. ORA concurs with applicant's capital structure.

26. Applicant used its 4.90% embedded cost of debt, as compared to ORA's calculated 6.36%.

27. Applicant seeks a 12.91% return on rate base with a 15.00% equity return, as compared to ORA's recommended 9.00% return on rate base return and 10.31% equity return.

28. Applicant and ORA supported their equity returns with DCF, CAPM, and RPM analyses.

29. Applicant applied its DCF analyses to two groups of large telecommunications companies consisting of eight independent telephone companies and seven RHCs.

30. Applicant's constant growth DCF analysis rejected all equity costs below 10.00% and above 14.00% as being implausible values.

31. Applicant concludes from its DCF, CAPM, and RPM analyses that a reasonable equity cost for large telecommunications firms is 12.00%, based on an overall range of 11.50% to 12.50%.

32. Applicant applied a 360 basis point premium to the 12.00% equity cost to arrive at a 15.60% equity cost for small telephone companies, such as applicant.

33. ORA's comparable group of companies for use in its DCF analysis consisted of 11 large telecommunications companies were also included in applicant's comparable group of companies.

34. ORA believes that its DCF, CAPM, and RPM analyses substantiates that investors currently require a 10.30% common equity return, the mid-point of its 8.60% to 12.56% common equity range for small telephone companies, such as applicant.

35. ORA concluded that a 10.30% equity return is a reasonable return to consider in arriving at a 9.00% return on rate base for small telephone companies.

36. The DCF, CAPM, and RPM models are dependent on subjective inputs.

37. The adoption of a return on rate base without reference to an adopted capital structure provides the utility with an incentive to manage its capital structure efficiently.

38. Applicant's 76.80% actual and 79.31% estimated test year equity ratios are much higher than that of applicant's and ORA's comparable companies' 51% average equity ratio.

39. Applicant's financial risk is lower than that of the comparable companies in applicant's and ORA's financial analyses due to less leveraged capital.

40. Applicant's risk is mitigated when compared to the study-group companies because of applicant's choice to continue with traditional rate-base regulation and continued participation in revenue recovery pools instead of opting for the new incentive rate regulation.

41. Applicant's risk is mitigated through its plan to not raise any significant amount of capital during the test year.

42. Applicant's 20.62 times average pretax interest coverage for the past five years exceeds Standard & Poor's 4.5 times pretax interest coverage benchmark for a double A debt rating.

43. Local competition comes from a multitude of telecommunications providers such as wireless carriers, cable carriers, and competitive local carriers.

44. Applicant and ORA concur that the billing surcharge should be eliminated.

45. Applicant does not concur with ORA's proposal to reduce the existing residential access-line rate below the \$16.85 per month level.

46. ORA's rate design proposal eliminates the existing 8.57% surcharge, decreases business and residential access line service rates on a proportionate basis, and provides for minor changes to other tariff rates.

47. Senate Bill 1035 prohibits telephone corporations from charging any of its customers for having an unlisted or unpublished telephone number and requires the Commission to implement this change on a revenue-neutral basis.

48. The ALJ recommended to withdraw applicant's unlisted and unpublished tariff rates and to offset projected revenue losses from the revenue requirement decrease required by this order.

49. All parties had an opportunity to comment on the ALJ's proposal to withdraw unlisted and unpublished tariff rates.

Conclusions of Law

1. Applicant should not be required to file a separate application for authority to transfer its aircraft to an affiliated company because applicant's ratepayers have not compensated applicant for any cost related to the aircraft and because the aircraft is not necessary in the performance of applicant's public utility service.

2. A 1.67229 net-to-gross multiplier should be used for the 1997 test year, resulting in a \$1,672 change in gross revenue for every \$1,000 change in net revenue.

3. A reasonable range of common equity for small telephone companies, such as applicant, should be between 60% and 80%.

4. Applicant's test year capital structure of 20.69% debt and 79.31% equity is reasonable and should be used for the 1997 test year.

5. ORA's 6.36% recommended embedded debt cost is reasonable and should be used for the 1997 test year.

6. Applicant should have the flexibility to increase or decrease its equity return through the management of its debt cost and equity return while maintaining a reasonable rate base return.

7. A specific equity return should not be adopted.

8. A reasonable range of equity returns should be adopted so that applicant may have flexibility to manage its equity return.

9. A reasonable range of equity returns for small telephone companies should be between 10.10% and 14.06%.

10. A 10.00% return rate base, which results in a 10.94% equity return, is reasonable and should be adopted for applicant because it appropriately recognizes risk and provides investors with a fair equity return.

11. Applicant's and ORA's joint intrastate results of operations at present rates should be adopted, which results in a 11.75% rate base return.

12. A \$1,100,899 gross revenue requirement decrease is reasonable and should be adopted for the test year.

13. Applicant should withdraw its tariff charges applicable to unlisted and unpublished services, with the related loss of revenue requirement offset against the revenue requirement decrease being required by this order.

14. The rate design proposal as set forth in Appendix C should be adopted.

15. The decrease in rates and charges authorized in Appendix B and Appendix C are just and reasonable and the present rates, insofar as they differ from those prescribed, are for the future unjust and unreasonable.

16. The revenue requirement reduction being authorized by this order should be applied retroactively to January 1, 1997, pursuant to D.96-05-027, and should flow back to ratepayers through a monthly surcredit not later than nine months after the effective date of the revised tariffs being required by Ordering Paragraph 1 of this order.

17. The application should be granted to the extent provided for in the following order.

O R D E R

IT IS ORDERED that:

1. Sierra Telephone Company, Inc. (applicant) shall file revised tariffs consistent with this order, the revenue requirement and revenue reduction in Appendix B, and the rates and charges in Appendix C. This filing shall comply with General Order (GO) 96-A. The revised tariffs shall become effective on June 1, 1997 upon approval of the Commission's Telecommunications Division and shall apply only to services rendered on and after their effective date.

2. Applicant shall establish a temporary surcredit balancing account to accumulate the revenue reduction required by this order from the effective date of the approved tariffs set forth in Ordering Paragraph 1 retroactive to January 1, 1997. Applicant shall file a tariff, consistent with GO 96-A, to refund the temporary surcredit balancing account over a time period not to exceed nine months from the effective date of this order. This temporary surcredit shall be applicable to the same billing base that applicant used for its 8.57% surcharge rate.

3. Applicant does not need to file an application pursuant to Public Utilities Code § 851 for authority to transfer its aircraft which has not received rate-base or operating-expense recovery from ratepayers and which is not useful for its utility operations.

4. Applicant shall withdraw the tariff charge for its Nonpublished Services, withdraw its Foreign Exchange and Inter-Exchange Receiving Services for which there are no customers, and eliminate its 8.57% billing surcharge; grandfather its local loop and Private Line services; concur in Pacific Bell's 175-T tariff for new customers seeking special access service; reduce its Zone 3 through and including Zone 5 residential 1-Party and universal lifeline reimbursed basic service rates, 1-Party business, key system, PABX, and centrex access lines Zones 1 through and including Zone 5 basic monthly service rates; and change its multi-element service charges, telephone answering service, visit charges, and returned check charge as summarized in Appendix C to this order.

5. Applicant shall notify its customers of the new rates, terms, and conditions adopted herein within 30 days after the date of this order, or, if performed by a bill insert, shall be completed within 60 days of the effective date of this order. Prior to such notification, applicant shall submit a draft of its customer notice to the Commission's Public Advisor for review and approval.

6. The application is granted to the extent set forth above.
7. Application 95-12-077 and Investigation 96-04-018 are closed.

This order is effective today.

Dated April 9, 1997, at San Francisco, California.

P. GREGORY CONLON
President

JESSIE J. KNIGHT, JR.

HENRY M. DUQUE

JOSIAH L. NEEPER

RICHARD A. BILAS

Commissioners

APPENDIX A

Sierra Telephone Company, Inc.
INTRASTATE RESULTS OF OPERATIONS
TEST YEAR 1997 AT PRESENT RATES

	<u>ORA's</u> <u>ESTIMATE</u>	<u>APPLICANT'S</u> <u>ESTIMATE</u>	<u>JOINT</u> <u>ESTIMATE</u>
<u>OPERATING REVENUES</u>			
Local Network Revenues	\$ 9,832,647	\$11,035,948	\$ 9,918,642
Network Access Service	6,133,605	6,851,350	6,299,039
Long Distance Network	4,665,955	5,364,613	4,787,841
Miscellaneous	827,144	827,144	827,144
LESS Uncollectibles	<u>147,090</u>	<u>147,090</u>	<u>150,263</u>
GROSS OPERATING REVENUE	\$21,312,261	\$23,931,965	\$21,682,403
<u>OPERATING EXPENSES</u>			
Plant Specific	\$ 2,276,522	\$ 3,261,649	\$ 2,511,989
Plant Non-Specific	1,093,156	1,204,295	1,242,264
Depreciation & Amort.	5,103,462	5,415,887	5,103,462
Customer Operations	2,207,613	2,110,717	2,420,292
Corporate Operations	<u>2,825,254</u>	<u>3,101,857</u>	<u>3,138,216</u>
TOTAL OPERATING EXPENSE	\$13,506,007	\$15,094,405	\$14,416,223
<u>OPERATING TAXES</u>			
Federal Income Tax Credit	\$ 0	\$ 338,999	\$ 0
Federal Income Tax	2,149,835	1,399,949	1,926,565
State Income Tax	613,161	410,129	567,500
Taxes Other than Income	378,252	379,097	349,706
Deferred Income Taxes	<u>0</u>	<u>583,572</u>	<u>0</u>
TOTAL OPERATING TAXES	3,141,248	3,111,746	2,843,771
NET OPERATING REVENUE	\$ 4,665,006	\$ 5,725,814	\$ 4,422,409
<u>RATE BASE</u>			
Plant in Service	\$64,940,680	\$67,605,229	\$64,940,680
Plant Construction	918,114	1,577,843	918,114
Materials & Supplies	584,225	614,914	584,225
Working Cash	935,954	1,674,737	1,089,520
LESS Depreciation Res.	25,391,595	22,765,848	25,391,595
LESS Deferred Tax	4,336,343	4,331,699	4,336,343
LESS Customer Deposits	<u>163,690</u>	<u>27,602</u>	<u>163,690</u>
TOTAL AVERAGE RATE BASE	\$37,487,345	\$44,347,574	\$37,640,911
RATE OF RETURN	12.44%	12.91%	11.75%

(END OF APPENDIX A)

APPENDIX B
Sierra Telephone Company, Inc.
INTRASTATE RESULTS OF OPERATIONS
TEST YEAR 1997 AT PRESENT & ADOPTED RATES

	<u>PRESENT RATES</u>	<u>ADOPTED RATES</u>
<u>OPERATING REVENUES</u>		
Local Network Revenues	\$ 9,918,642	\$ 8,817,743
Network Access Service	6,299,039	6,299,039
Long Distance Network	4,787,841	4,787,841
Miscellaneous	827,144	827,144
LESS Uncollectibles	<u>150,263</u>	<u>143,536</u>
GROSS OPERATING REVENUE	\$21,682,403	\$20,588,231
<u>OPERATING EXPENSES</u>		
Plant Specific	\$ 2,511,989	\$ 2,511,989
Plant Non-Specific	1,242,264	1,242,264
Depreciation & Amort.	5,103,462	5,103,462
Customer Operations	2,420,292	2,420,292
Corporate Operations	<u>3,138,216</u>	<u>3,138,216</u>
TOTAL OPERATING EXPENSE	\$14,416,223	\$14,416,223
<u>OPERATING TAXES</u>		
Federal Income Tax	\$1,926,565	\$1,587,436
State Income Tax	567,500	470,775
Taxes Other than Income	<u>349,706</u>	<u>349,706</u>
TOTAL OPERATING TAXES	2,843,771	2,407,917
NET OPERATING REVENUE	\$4,422,409	\$3,764,091
<u>RATE BASE</u>		
Plant in Service	\$64,940,680	\$64,940,680
Plant Construction	918,114	918,114
Materials & Supplies	584,225	584,225
Working Cash	1,089,520	1,089,520
LESS Depreciation Res.	25,391,595	25,391,595
LESS Deferred Tax	4,336,343	4,336,343
LESS Customer Deposits	<u>163,690</u>	<u>163,690</u>
TOTAL AVERAGE RATE BASE	\$37,640,911	\$37,640,911
RATE OF RETURN	11.75%	10.00%

(END OF APPENDIX B)

APPENDIX C

Page 1

Sierra Telephone Company, Inc.
Test Year 1997 Adopted Tariff Changes

NO.	TARIFF ITEM	MONTHLY RATE CHANGE	
		FROM	TO
A- 1	<u>Residential Service</u>		
	1-Party Zone 3	\$20.30	\$18.75
	1-Party Zone 4	24.15	21.25
	1-Party Zone 5	28.00	23.75
	<u>Business Service</u>		
	1-Party Zone 1	28.55	26.00
	1-Party Zone 2	28.55	26.00
	1-Party Zone 3	28.95	26.35
	1-Party Zone 4	32.85	29.90
	1-Party Zone 5	36.70	33.40
	Key System Zone 1	28.55	26.00
	Key System Zone 2	28.55	26.00
	Key System Zone 3	28.95	26.35
	Key System Zone 4	32.85	29.90
	Key System Zone 5	36.70	33.40
	PABX Zone 1	28.55	26.00
	PABX Zone 2	28.55	26.00
	PABX Zone 3	28.95	26.35
	PABX Zone 4	32.85	29.90
	PABX Zone 5	36.70	33.40
A- 2/A	16R		
	<u>Universal Lifeline Reimbursed</u>		
	1-Party Residence Zone 3	14.68	13.13
	1-Party Residence Zone 4	18.53	15.63
	1-Party Residence Zone 5	22.38	18.13
A -5	<u>Digital Centrex Service</u>		
	Centrex Access Line Zone 1	28.55	26.00
	Centrex Access Line Zone 2	28.55	26.00
	Centrex Access Line Zone 3	28.95	26.35
	Centrex Access Line Zone 4	32.85	29.90
	Centrex Access Line Zone 5	36.70	33.40
A-14	<u>Directory Listing</u>		
	NonPublished Service	.30	0
A-16	<u>Foreign Exchange Service</u>	10.45	0
A-16	<u>Multi-Element Service Charges</u>		
	Service Order Charge	18.75	18.75
	Service Order Charge-Other	0	10.00
	Directory Change Order	18.75	10.00

APPENDIX C
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A-21 <u>Telephone Answering Service</u>		
Business Answer Zone 1	28.55	26.00
A-25 <u>Billing Surcharge</u>	8.57%	0
A-26 <u>Visit Charge</u>		
Hourly Normal Rate	25.00	40.00
Hourly Overtime Rate	35.00	45.00
Rule 9 <u>Return Check Charge</u>	5.00	10.00

TARIFF CONCURRENCE

Pacific Bell 175-T tariff for new customers
seeking special access service.

GRANDFATHERED SERVICES

G- 1 Local Loop.
PL Private Line.

SERVICE WITHDRAW

A-14 NonPublished Services.
A-16 Foreign Exchange Service.
A-19 Inter-Exchange Receiving Services.
A-25 Billing Surcharge.

(END OF APPENDIX C)