

**Comments of Commissioner Rachelle Chong at the
Latino Issues Forum Consumer Education Campaign Launch
El Concilio, Stockton, California
February 26th, 2007**

It is wonderful to return to El Concilio today to help launch the Consumer Education Campaign of Latino Issues Forum.

Today, I drove out from San Francisco to Stockton, my hometown, to praise the Latino Issues Forum for providing leadership in developing a consumer education campaign. Wednesday's Consumer Education Campaign will provide important in-language assistance and information to customers of phone and energy companies.

The concept of consumer awareness fairs emerged from a proceeding begun last year at the PUC where the PUC is studying language issues relating to telecommunications carriers. Many community organizations, including Latino Issues Forum, suggested some "in community" events to provide consumer information and assistance targeted to low English proficient consumers.

The PUC thought this was an excellent idea, and so the PUC hosted the very first consumer awareness fair in Fresno last October 2006, focusing on the Latino and Hmong communities there. It went very well.

This coming year, both the PUC and LIF are sponsoring more consumer awareness fairs throughout California. We are partnering on a few of them, including this Wednesday's event, and one down in San Bernardino in late April. We are also doing some fairs separately.

Some upcoming PUC-sponsored consumer fairs include March 7th in the Fruitvale area of Oakland, and on April 4th in San Francisco's Chinatown. You may find more information about these consumer fairs on our website, at www.cpuc.ca.gov.

At these consumer education fairs, we have in-language assistance and information on phone and energy services. We focus on consumers that are predominantly low or non-English proficient.

We bring together representatives of the local phone company, the local electric and gas utility, wireless phone companies in the region, and local community organizations and their members to provide face-to-face consumer assistance. A

consumer may bring a question or complaint on their bill to the phone or energy company.

At the same time, the PUC and the carriers educate consumers and the local community organizations on our low income programs: Lifeline for discounted phone service, and various state and federal programs for assistance with energy bills.

If you are wondering why the PUC is reaching out to phone consumers, the answer is simple. No longer do we have a single wired phone company, AT&T. Since the Eighties, the US government has introduced new competition into the phone marketplace, allowing new competitors like your cable TV company and others to offer you wired phone service. The FCC also licensed between three to eight wireless phone providers per region, providing mobile phone service.

Innovation also has brought US consumers voice over Internet protocol, a way to place and receive phone calls using the Internet. Companies like Vonage, Skype and 8X8 offer VOIP services.

As a result, consumers now have many choices about their phone service, and it can be confusing. So, the California PUC wants to help consumers understand how to be a smart shopper when buying phone services.

To this end, the PUC launched www.calphoneinfo.com – a leading consumer education site for phone consumers. On our CalPhoneInfo site, we provide information in English and 12 different languages on understanding your phone bill, how to be a smart shopper for wireless phone service, understanding what those fees and surcharges are on your bill, and how to complain to the PUC should there be a dispute.

We also educate consumers on how to protect themselves against cramming and slamming. Cramming means the practice of putting unauthorized charges on your phone bill, and slamming means changing your phone provider without your consent.

In addition, the PUC has established a new Telecom Fraud hotline. If you think you were cheated by a phone company, you may call our toll free hotline at 1-800 649-7570 to report the fraud so our Enforcement Division can investigate. Our hotline is available Monday to Friday, 10 AM to 3 PM.

Also, the PUC is working with outstanding community organizations like Latino Issues Forum to put on these Consumer Awareness Fairs to extend particularly help consumers in low English proficient neighborhoods, and also to seniors and low income communities.

Again, I commend Latino Issues Forum for their work in this area. I look forward to future events as part of our partnership with El Concilio, Latino Issues Forum, and the participating utilities and carriers.

I would like to thank Jose Rodriguez and El Concilio for hosting the Consumer Awareness Fair this Wednesday, and Mayor Chavez for his enthusiastic support.

Thank you.