

County Jail phone bill \$1.9 million — but this one's on the prisoners' dime

By Phil Tracy

*"Woke up this morning, I was all alone
Saw your picture by the telephone
I was missing you so bad
Wish I had you here to hold
All I've got is this touch telephone
Guess I'll have to give you call"*
— Telephone Song, by
Stevie Ray Vaughan

Not long ago, a fellow I've worked with for more than 10 years got himself in a jam over a domestic violence dispute and wound up in County Jail. San Francisco may have the world's lowest clearance rate when it comes to homicides, but domestic violence is another matter. Eight weeks later he was still in jail.

I visited him one Sunday to see how he was doing. Before I left, I said he should call from time to time and let me and his fellow workers know what was happening because we were concerned about him.

He said he could only call collect. I told him the company would pick up the cost. Just stay in touch.

A few days later he called and we talked. Then, a few days after that he spoke with another worker. Oddly enough, he never called again.

I let a few more weeks go by, then called his public defender. Turns out he'd been released the day before, two days shy of three months in jail.

The day's post brought our monthly telephone bill.

I check the company phone bills and my practiced eye quickly spotted the "Correctional Phone Charges": \$7.26. Finally, on page 8, I discovered the

charge was for the two collect phone calls from a location six blocks from our office, one lasting five minutes, the other a mere two. They actually cost a total of \$6.27; the other buck came courtesy of various state surcharges — the Universal Lifeline Telephone Service Surcharge was my favorite — and combined city, state and federal sales taxes tallying 74 cents.

The conversations cost \$1 a minute, or roughly the cost of phone sex, as I've learned from keeping an eye on the company phone bills.

The question of giving prisoners access to phones has been around just about as long as the phones themselves. In the 1930s

film noirs, the bad guys were always telling each other to make sure they have a dime to call their lawyer, in case the caper went sour. (That was back in the days before the state provided criminals with lawyers free of charge.)

Enter the 21st century. Nobody does nothin' for nobody without making a little profit on the side. This rule especially applies to county jails and telephone companies.

The coin phone box was never beloved by phone companies. Bad people found ways to jam them and then came back in the dead of night and stole all the quarters that had built up during the day. And people broke them out of frustration or generalized

anger. When the phone company was a utility providing a vital service to the citizenry, it was forced to maintain the coin boxes. Following deregulation, such thinking is now passé. So is the coin box.

Virtually none are left in jails and prisons. The pay phone at San Francisco County Jail lasted longer than most. Back in the early '90s, the Federal Communications Commission and the state PUC passed regulations allowing companies that provide phone services to correctional facilities to charge as much as they want. These companies, in turn, offer over-the-counter kickbacks to said correctional facilities in return for long-term

contracts.

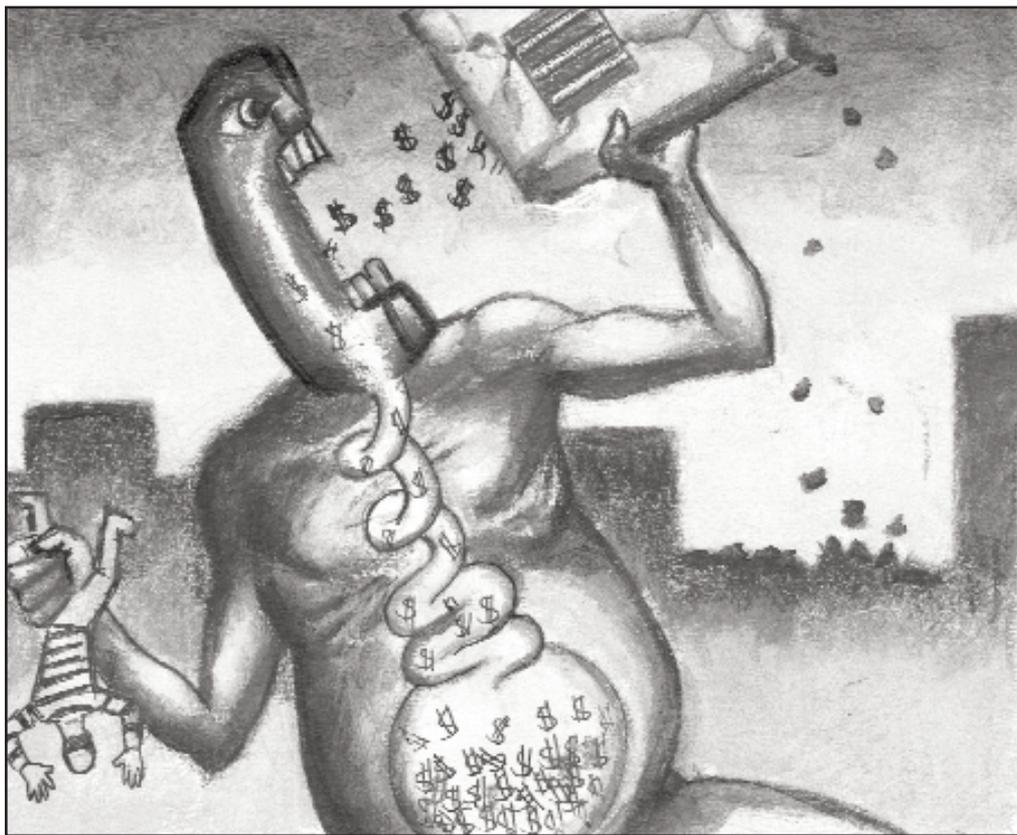
Eileen Hirst, a spokeswoman for Sheriff Michael Hennessey, said the coin box at 850 Bryant stayed until Pac Bell, which had the contract, refused to renew it. Hennessey, who won his post 22 years ago after a career as a prisoner's advocate, tried several other options, including phone cards and assigning prisoners pin numbers linked to their commissary account. Both produced administrative nightmares — the pecking order in prisons ensured some prisoners would wind up with others' pin number or cards, resulting in rampant abuse. The sheriff's office finally signed with Evercom Inc. of Texas, a collect phone system, which Hirst maintained was "somewhat lower than the rest."

But not without negotiating its upfront kickback.

All of San Francisco's kickback goes into the "prisoners' education fund," which provides for various training and rehabilitation programs, law books for the prisoners' library and interns to staff the library. The take for fiscal year 2001-02 was \$717,000, which represents 38% of the \$1.9 million Evercom collected from guests of the County Jail last year. At \$1 a minute this represents more than 31,500 hours, or more than 1,300 days, which is just under four years of talking on the phone.

When questioned about the enormity of this figure, Hirst pointed out that "profit" had always been taken from the services provided prisoners, including the commissary that sells them snacks and candy and even the old coin box, which Pac Bell

ILLUSTRATION: CARL ANGEL



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The Last Connection: a prose poem

By Ed Bowers

How many telephone wires connect themselves to you? If disease could be transmitted through the phone system, then the Dept. of Public Health would be doomed. But in the meantime, short or long distance, it is safe to use a phone. The only disease a phone transmits is the human voice and word, which is omnipresent, connecting an anonymous us to everyone everywhere.

But if this is so, why are there so many lonely people?

Picture yourself alone, trapped inside a body sitting on a bed behind a locked door waiting for the phone to ring. For some, the phone is like an icon representing a god prayed to by a supplicant waiting desperately for an answer that never comes at the moment needed. I suppose this is why so many phones are thrown bitterly onto the floor only to be picked up later and placed delicately back into their cradles, each phone a Baby Jesus, the last connection

to hope for those forced to live every day and night like a Last Supper.

I see hopeless phoneless people talking to themselves on the streets every day, and it is understandable. They are alone with madness—desiring to communicate rationally impossible lives—their connection to others disconnected for lack of something, now having only themselves to call, as they receive a busy signal on the other end, forcing them over into insane, where they hang up forever.

A few years ago I remember walking around the Tenderloin, encountering an African American man, neatly trimmed beard, clean simple clothes, thin with big eyes who appeared always angry. He talked violently, as though abusing himself, and I could hear him coming toward my block before he or I arrived in the same vicinity. There was nothing really threatening about him, and if there was, he gave me enough prior warning to avoid him or his creative frustrated desire to kill and

remake me in his image.

An aspect of this man I found particularly interesting and admirable was that he hated my guts, and had the directness to express this sentiment clearly with no equivocation. I loved encountering him, savoring his hatred like a fine wine; and he was so consistent, unlike others who love me one second and despise me the next, that he gave me a sense of stability and consistency of which I was in need.

"Go home!" he yelled at me one rainy day.

"I am home," I explained.

"I don't like you!" he screamed.

"I like you," I said. "I especially like the way you talk to yourself. Now have a nice day. And keep on talking."

This response must have confused the man, since for a few moments, after I walked through a green light and left him standing on the wet street corner, he was silent, a minor miracle considering the fact that he never shut up. You see, this man talked all the time, only to himself, never listening

to anyone. But perhaps for a few seconds, I got through to him, causing his radio station to go black with dead air and

*"I don't like you!"
he screamed.
"I like you," I said.
"I especially like
the way you talk to
yourself."*

white noise and shock.

The last time I saw him, he almost smiled. Then he said quietly, "I still don't like you."

"That's understandable," I replied.

I haven't seen him around anymore. He's disappeared, which I find regrettable because I had big plans for him. If I were ever able to accumulate enough connections and power, I'd arrange for him to be hooked up to a giant loudspeaker hidden in an underground gothic grotto where he could talk to himself at leisure day and

night, his frantic voice heard all over town, drowning out the one-way cell phone conversations, the traffic noises, the ambulance and police sirens, the domestic quarrels, the howls of crack addicts and drunks, the sinister, self-centered business interests, the idiot giggling television shows and commercials, the polite conversations of corporate executive gangsters high on wine and downsizing, and, more than anything else, the silence of self-serving indifference that hangs over this city like a web of sold-out souls.

Even though he hated my guts, I kind of miss the guy. I hope someone or something hasn't caused him to hang up. He was a man who had something to say, and though no one listened, he refused to stop talking.

I'd hate to think that I was his last connection.

No one understood what he was saying, including me.

But someday someone good, and worthy of love, will.

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