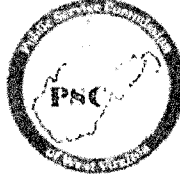


Public Service Commission
of West Virginia

201 Brooks Street, P.O. Box 812
Charleston, West Virginia 25323



Phone: (304) 340-0300
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July 31, 2024

Karen Buckley
Executive Secretary
Public Service Commission
P. O. Box 812
Charleston, WV 25323

RE: **CASE NO. 24-0338-G-W-E-CTV-GI**
A General Investigation into notifications by utilities and cable providers regarding utility and cable service outages.

Dear Ms. Buckley:

Enclosed is a copy of the "Task Force Final Report" in the above-referenced proceeding.

A copy has been served electronically upon all parties of record in this proceeding.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steven Hamula", is written over a faint, circular stamp or watermark.

Steven Hamula
Staff Attorney
WV State Bar I.D. No. 4580

SH/jt
Enclosures

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TASK FORCE FINAL REPORT
CASE NO. 24-0338-G-W-E-CTV-GI

**PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION
OF WEST VIRGINIA
CHARLESTON**

CASE NO. 24-0338-G-W-E-CTV-GI

A General Investigation into notifications by utilities and cable providers regarding utility and cable service outages.

Procedural History

On April 8, 2024, the Public Service Commission of West Virginia (“Commission”) initiated a General Investigation into notifications by utilities and cable service providers to customers regarding utility service and cable service outages. The Commission named various major utilities and cable service providers as respondents to this proceeding and required responses from each of them regarding their individual customer outage notification procedures within twenty (20) days. The named respondents included Mountaineer Gas Company, Hope Gas, Inc., Consumers Gas Utility Company, Union Oil & Gas, Inc., Cardinal Natural Gas Company, West Virginia-American Water Company, Beckley Water Company, Appalachian Power Company and Wheeling Power Company, Monongahela Power/Potomac Edison Power Company, Morgantown Utility Board, Frontier West Virginia Inc. and Optimum (collectively the “Respondent Parties”).

Specifically, the Commission wanted the Respondent Parties to explain how they notify their individual affected customers of service outages, what plans they have, if any, to add, expand, modify or improve their current notification systems, describe any technical or physical barriers that exist to providing electronic

notifications by email or text message, and describe procedures in place to notify mass communication media of outages.

In addition to the aforementioned Respondent Parties, the Commission served notice of this proceeding on the West Virginia Rural Water Association, the WV Municipal League, and the WV Internet and Cable TV Association. In so doing, the Commission indicated that it would welcome responses from the associations' members, but members were not specifically required to provide a response. Thereafter, each of the named Respondent Parties filed responses to the questions proffered by the Commission in the April 8, 2024 Commission Order. An abbreviated summary of those responses is attached hereto as Exhibit 1.

By Commission Order entered on May 22, 2024, the Commission created the Utility and Cable Service Outage Notification Task Force ("Task Force") to discuss and recommend best practices and universal procedures for notifying customers of utility and cable service outages. The Commission required Staff to lead the Task Force and required the Respondent Parties to participate in the Task Force.

The Task Force met on June 24, 2024. The meeting was conducted both virtually and in person. All of the Respondent Parties noted earlier herein participated in the meeting as did representatives of the West Virginia Rural Water Association, the WV Internet and Cable TV Association, and the Consumer

Advocate Division.¹ During the meeting, all of the aforementioned Respondent Parties were provided the opportunity to present a high-level summary of its current outage notification protocols intended to illustrate both the current and planned notice practices specific to each of the Respondent Parties. The Respondent Parties' summaries were provided by representatives who were experts in their particular industries, and also familiar with existing regulatory and safety requirements attendant to those industries.

Introduction

Regardless of whether it's attributable to high winds, excessive rain or snow, flash flooding, ice storms, or extreme heat or cold, every public utility and cable TV provider eventually faces its own set of possible weather-related issues that can leave its customers out of service. In addition to weather related causes, customer service outages can also be caused by equipment or facility failures, accidents, vandalism, and other unforeseen events. As a result, public utilities and cable TV providers are constantly tasked with developing and refining procedures and best practices in outage communications in order to ensure the release of the right information, at the right time, on the right outlets and platforms, in order to reach the right customers.

In this regard, appropriate outage communications should be an essential part of any public utility or cable TV provider's marketing and communications

¹ Exhibit 2 includes a list of the Task Force Members with Participant Names and Contact Information.

strategy. When public utility or cable TV service goes out, customers need answers. Undoubtedly, customers in outage situations first look to their public utility or cable TV provider for explanations, details and estimated restoration times, in addition to safety and security protocols. In the past, best practices in outage communication may have centered around emails, phone calls, and even press releases. Today, however, customers expect more immediate updates via text alerts, real-time outage maps, and social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (X).

Indeed, social media is quickly becoming an absolute must-have in today's rapidly evolving digital world. During a service outage event, affected customers will often visit a public utility or cable TV provider's social media pages to find answers to questions or updates on service related information before they ever click on the service provider's website. This is why it is important that social media is built up with appropriate links, FAQs, and continuing posts with relevant information regarding the underlying outage situation that have the interests of affected customers in mind. Thus, when it comes to communicating outages, social media can and should be a public utility or cable TV provider's best friend. Social media platforms allow for the provision of quick updates regarding the status of outage situations so customers are not left searching for relevant information.

Irrespective of the overall importance of social media, however, public utilities and cable TV providers need to develop and keep up to date individual customer outage notification plans that recognize the nuances inherent in their

industry, and also takes into consideration factors like the number of overall customers being served, the geographic size of the public utility or cable TV provider's service area, state and regulatory requirements, and financial considerations. An outage notification plan should be no less important to the operations of a public utility or cable TV provider than a disaster recovery or other operational plan that may be utilized in the event of a service affecting occurrence.

In short, providing outage notifications effectively is crucial for public utilities and cable TV providers to maintain customer satisfaction and manage expectations during service interruptions. Although it is difficult to recommend best practices that may be universally applied across all public utility and cable TV providers, the Task Force established by the Commission in the instant proceeding did note certain best practices that may be useful in the development of public utility and Cable TV outage notification plans in West Virginia.

Summary of Discussion and Comments of Task Force

The Respondent Parties did review the information filed by the other Respondent Parties in response to the general questions presented by the Commission in its April 8th Order. It was thus acknowledged that the Commission had placed distinctly different public utility industries into this general investigation. Consequently, the Respondent Parties recognized that the services they provide to their end user customers have very distinct properties and methods of service delivery – underground pipes and wires, overhead wires located on poles, and fiber optics (on both poles and underground).

As a general proposition, all of the Respondent Parties agreed that current best practices dictate that each of the Respondent Parties should, and in fact do, currently have in place plans and procedures governing the issuance of customer notifications in the event of a service outage. However, the Respondent Parties also acknowledged that these current customer outage notification practices are unique and are crafted and implemented in recognition of the distinctions not only in the public utility and cable TV industries, but also among individual companies within those industries.

These distinctions among the Respondent Parties include differences in system design, differences in the service or product being delivered and how it is used (human consumption, cooking, heating or cooling, information access, etc.), and differences in the size (both geographic and customer count), and location of the involved service areas. Because of all of the aforementioned inherent distinctions, all of the Respondent Parties generally agreed that there was not a “one size fits all approach” when it comes to properly providing customer outage notifications. Accordingly, the Respondent Parties generally believe that any best practices ultimately adopted by the Commission need to allow for flexibility within individual service industries and companies.

With respect to Planned Outages, all of the Respondent Parties do their best within their respective service industries to design and implement Planned Outages in order to keep to a minimum the number of customers without service and within as short a duration as reasonably possible. In most instances, Planned

Outages are undertaken whenever reasonably possible within designated maintenance windows, normally from midnight to 6 am, on weekends, or at other times when the impact of the planned service outage can be minimized.

With respect to Unplanned Outages, the industry distinctions noted earlier herein really come into play. For gas utilities, Unplanned Outages are mostly attributable to damaged pipelines, or gas supplier failures. As a result, these outage causes and the appropriate remedies are oftentimes readily identifiable and quickly resolved. For the Respondent Parties in the natural gas industry, Unplanned Outages affecting a large number of customers over an extended duration are relatively infrequent.

By comparison, an Unplanned Outage for a water utility is mostly due to line and main breaks or to pumping and storage issues. Additionally, Unplanned Outages for water utilities can also relate to source water contamination, plant operational issues and weather. For electric, telecommunications, and cable TV providers², however, Unplanned Outages are largely attributable to weather related events, i.e., excessive wind, rain, snow, ice, along with equipment and mechanical failures, and outages caused by accidents or other recognized force majeure events beyond the Respondent Parties' reasonable control.

² WVCTA - The Internet & Television Association ("WVCTA"), which is comprised of the following cable providers: Armstrong, Breezeline, Charter, Comcast, Massillon Cable TV, Optimum and Shentel noted that "unplanned outages" for cable providers are almost always the result of the lack of electric service. As a result, WVCTA asserted that its members are totally dependent on the availability of electric services to customer locations and are equally dependent on electric providers for the timing of service restoration and cannot communicate any type of timely or accurate information to customers until restorative actions are taken by electric providers.

Regardless of the utility industry involved, however, an accurate assessment and evaluation of the Unplanned Outage is critical. Because each outage situation is different, such an assessment is necessary in order to determine the nature of the outage, the extent of repairs and remedial action necessary to resolve the outage, and the expected duration of the outage.

Overall, the Respondent Parties agreed that there cannot be a one size fits all solution to notification among the different public utility and Cable TV industries. As a result, the Respondent Parties advocated that joint recommendations for best practices for customer outage notifications be based on the following considerations:

- a. Type of industry.
- b. The size of the utility both geographically and from a customer count perspective.
- c. The number of customers affected by the outage and duration of outage.
 - i. Mass texting and phone communication may not be appropriate in all situations. Experience and the comments reported by the Parties indicate that customers often do not give cell numbers or provide accurate timely updates.
- d. Notice plans should be reasonable, transparent and updated as needed.
 - i. Systems and outages may be “intermingled” with customers still in service and 911 type calling systems may not work well or lead to confusion.
- e. Electronic communications of all kinds may not be necessary in all situations. (example: a customer outage involving a small number of affected customers and/or an outage that will be restored within a short timeframe.
- f. Cost considerations
 - i. complex mass notification systems may not be justified due to infrequent issues and customer participation.
- g. Other regulatory requirements in place either by different state agencies – Bureau for Public Health, Pipeline Hazardous Materials and Safety Administration (PHMSA) and for multi-jurisdictional companies, compliance with existing state regulations in other states.

It was thus suggested and recommended that each of the Respondent Parties be directed to submit its own specific plans. This option allows for recognition of industry differences, utility size differences, cost impact differences, and timing implementation differences for each of the Respondent Parties and other service providers in West Virginia that is considering enhancing or expanding their current outage notification process.

Because of challenges presented in maintaining and updating customer contact information, if a Respondent Party does not currently have a reliable data base of customer contact information, which would allow it to notify or send alerts to customers of outages, service interruptions or emergencies in their service area by email, text, or phone call, they should endeavor to establish one.

As such relates to natural gas utilities, the issuance of additional alerts or notices by email, text or phone would be provided as a supplement to, and not in lieu of any personal contact requirements which may otherwise exist under applicable natural gas pipeline safety rules.

General Compilation of Best Practices for Outage Notifications

Without a doubt, service outages can leave affected customers concerned and confused, but the provision of relevant, responsive, and expedient outage notifications can help alleviate these customer feelings. Accordingly, each of the Respondent Parties should be directed to develop, maintain, reevaluate and

submit its own specific outage notification plan to the Commission. Once an initial customer notification plan has been filed, if the filed plan is subsequently changed in a material fashion, the involved Respondent Party should provide notice of the change to the Commission along with an updated version of the revised plan. If no material change to the previously filed plan has occurred, the Respondent Parties should simply notify the Commission of the same on an annual and continuing basis thereafter. This option would necessarily consider industry differences, utility size differences, cost impact differences, and implementation timing differences for any of the Respondent Parties that are contemplating a revision or enhancement to their current customer outage notification processes.

Differences in utility industry areas, composition, size, and structure notwithstanding, recommended best practices for potential inclusion in these outage notification plans may include:

- Maintaining and updating contact information for customers, and providing opportunities for customers to update their contact information and preferred method of receiving alerts and notifications (by email, text or telephone call) in the event of a service outage or emergency
- Promptly alerting customers to a service outage as soon as possible and providing regular updates on the progress of restoration efforts. Even if there's no immediate resolution, keeping customers informed helps manage expectations
- Use plain language to describe the issue and its impact. Avoid technical jargon that might confuse customers. Provide estimated restoration times if possible
- Provide clear instructions on what customers should do during an outage, especially in emergencies or severe weather conditions.
- Be transparent about the cause of the outage (if known) and what steps are being taken to resolve it
- Sending follow-up links of outage maps or restoration times

- Being able to respond to customer questions or concerns relative to the service outage. Affected customers will often post questions or concerns on a utility's social pages or posts. It's important to not let these comments fall by the wayside. Respond accordingly with as much information as you can, including links to your outage map, real-time restoration updates or safety tips
- When appropriate considering the type and scale of an outage situation, share information on multiple platforms including email, text, company website, and especially social media to ensure that affected customers are able to view the outage updates on the platform of their choosing
- When appropriate considering the type and scale of an outage situation, use social media like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (X) to drive customers to other important outage information, like an outage map or to relevant safety information
- YouTube can be used to post and share proactive safety tips and other informational videos in advance of a planned or potential unplanned outage due to an expected weather-related event
- Develop and/or utilize user-friendly apps or portals where affected customers can easily report outages, check outage maps, and receive relevant status updates.
- Once the issue is resolved, send a final notification confirming restoration of service and thanking customers for their patience
- Maintain and regularly update outage maps on your website or app. Make sure they are easy to understand and navigate, showing affected areas and estimated times for restoration
- Encourage customers to provide outage information directly to Respondent Parties as oftentimes the service providers are unaware of an outage until reported by a customer
- Encourage customers to provide feedback on outage notifications and updates
- Consider proactive notifications for scheduled maintenance or potential outages due to weather forecasts or other predictable events.
- Ensure customer service representatives are well-trained to handle outage-related inquiries with accurate and consistent information.

By considering these recommended best practices for potential inclusion in their individual outage notification plans, public utilities and cable TV providers

can enhance customer satisfaction, minimize frustration during outages, and demonstrate a commitment to transparent and effective communication.

EXHIBIT 1 – SUMMARY OF RESPONDENT PARTY RESPONSES

CASE NO. 24-0338-G-W-E-CTV-GI

Respondent and industry	(i) Current notification for individual affected customers	(ii) Plans to add, expand, or modify notification systems	(iii) Barriers to expanding text or emails	(iv) Mass media communication procedures in place
<p>Mountaineer Gas Company</p>	<p>In-person premise visit for gas turn off and turn on. Doorknob card left if no communication. Dispatch available 24/7 to take calls.</p>	<p>Exploring feasibility for outages of more than 100 customers and duration of 24 hours or more: Automated/electronic outage notification. Website update system; and Automated 911 system update. Following PHMSA proposed rulemaking for further notification requirements.</p>	<p>Not all customers have or provide contact information either cell phone or email. Delays in updating information. Timing of notice for short duration outages. Automated 911 that is too broadly disseminated may cause customer confusion. Costs. Timing. Accuracy of systems.</p>	<p>Responses and interaction with local officials based on unique large outage situation. Exploring feasibility for outages involving more than 500 customers and duration of 24 hours or more: a Mass Communication/Public Service Announcement protocol by service center location.</p>
<p>Hope Gas Company</p>	<p>Creates targeted notification area. Campaign management application linked to customer account phone number. Message script is designed for Winter, Summer or special.</p>	<p>None.</p>	<p>Not all customers have or provide contact information either cell phone or email.</p>	<p>January 2024 implemented online outage notification page on its website.</p>
<p>Cardinal Natural Gas Company</p>	<p>In-person premise visit for gas turn off and turn on. Doorknob card left if no communication.</p>	<p>None.</p>	<p>Not all customers have or provide contact information either cell phone or email.</p>	<p>If an event occurs requiring a Mass Communication/Public Service Announcement, will notify local media outlets as soon as possible.</p>
<p>Union Oil & Gas, Inc.</p>	<p>Did not explain current individual notification process. Has ability to contact 96% of its customers by either email or telephone or both. Can send a blanket email to distinct "Systems". Can narrow outage area in email be describing location streets, houses, or subdivisions that are affected.</p>	<p>Investigating sending mass text messages and/or "robocalls" to affected customers in outage areas. With each customer telephone call, email or in-person contact request is made for updated contact information. Sending bill messages and inserts and targeted mailings to customers requesting contact information.</p>	<p>Not all customers have or provide contact information either cell phone or email.</p>	<p>If an event occurs requiring a Mass Communication/Public Service Announcement, a determination is made as to whether media outlets need to be contacted.</p>

Respondent	(i) Current notification for individual affected customers	(ii) Plans to add, expand, or modify notification systems	(iii) Barriers to expanding text or emails	(iv) Mass media communication procedures in place
<p>West Virginia-American Water Company</p>	<p>Identifies outages as planned or unplanned. Outage means complete lack of available water. Water industry has other service impairments that are not considered outages – water is supplied but has (i) below standard or PSC pressure requirements, (ii) precautionary boil water, (iii) do not boil, or (iv) use only for sanitation, or other.</p> <p>Events triggering “boil water” require 24-hour updates until advisory is lifted.</p> <p>Uses Alerts1View application that includes phone calls, texts, and emails to customers. Normal message delivery is only during 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Data is loaded into system by Field Resource Coordination Center. Maps are generated on website. Outage alerts called in by customers are also mapped. Call-in number can be loaded with “front end message” explaining situation before sending call to queue.</p> <p>Certain situations are in-person door-to-door or leave doorknob card.</p>	<p>Continues to explore enhancements to Alert1View. Evaluating new metering and system monitoring technology. Sending bill messages and inserts and targeted mailings as well as social media posts to customers requesting contact information.</p>	<p>Not all customers have or provide contact information either cell phone or email.</p> <p>If service in landlord's name customer must sign-up for Code RED system.</p> <p>Costs (need for rate recovery). Timing.</p> <p>Accuracy of systems.</p>	<p>Responses and interaction with local officials based on unique outage situation.</p> <p>Press releases are sent to Department of Health for all boil water advisories and local health departments, schools, and critical customers such as hospitals.</p>

Page 3 - Summary of Responses by Respondent Parties pursuant to the Commissioner's April 8, 2024 Order

Respondent	(i) Current notification for individual affected customers	(ii) Plans to add, expand, or modify notification systems	(iii) Barriers to expanding text or emails	(iv) Mass media communication procedures in place
<p>Morgantown Utility Board</p>	<p>Identifies outages as planned or unplanned. Complies with WV Department of Health and Human Resources "Manual of Environmental Health Procedures" and provides boil water advisories to the public and relevant agencies withing six hours of outages.</p> <p>Developed a proprietary software program – MUB Connect – to alert customers to all outages.</p> <p>System allows identifying area on an electronic map then the software populates the database with all of the names, addresses, email addresses and mobile numbers of impacted customers. Specific content message is drafted and sent to impacted customers. Additionally, system tracks status of all text messages and phone calls (e.g., delivered, answered, voicemail, etc.). End of outage communication is sent. All customer communications are automatically imported to the details on each customer's account.</p>	<p>None.</p>	<p>Not all customers have or provide contact information either cell phone or email.</p>	<p>Communicates by email with the Morgantown Dominion Post to provide advance notice of planned outages.</p> <p>Complies with Source Water Protection Plan requirements of WVa. Code 16-1-9c(b)(11)</p> <p>maintains and timely updates a comprehensive communication plan for all manner of communications, including the media for impacts to drinking water.</p>

Respondent	(i) Current notification for individual affected customers	(ii) Plans to add, expand, or modify notification systems	(iii) Barriers to expanding text or emails	(iv) Mass media communication procedures in place
<p><input checked="" type="radio"/> Beckley Water Company</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Monongahela Power Company and The Potomac Edison Company</p> <p><input type="radio"/> electric</p>	<p>Impacted customers are notified of outages and boil water situations by texted or automated voice telephone calls using TextEmAll. System allows for identifying area on an electronic map then the software populates the database with all the names and mobile or landline numbers of impacted customers.</p>	<p>Sending bill messages and inserts and targeted mailings requesting contact information and also can be done in-person with cashiers accepting payment.</p> <p>May 2024 update to email and text messages; Will provide capability to modify text templates as needed and improve capacity and performance; New ability to send 500 text or emails per second which should enhance timeliness of notifications.</p> <p>Evaluating auto enroll program for notifications even when customers have not enrolled. There would instead be an opt-out mechanism.</p>	<p>Not all customers have or provide contact information either cell phone or email.</p> <p>Rural areas lack mobile and internet reliable connectivity.</p> <p>Filtering of messages by spam rules.</p> <p>Current system requires customers to enroll and opt-in to receive messages.</p> <p>For unplanned outages, customers need to have reported their outage to receive the status proactive notifications.</p>	<p>If a weather event is expected that could result in significant or extended power outages, emails are sent to customers in the predicted affected areas with information on Company preparations, safety tips and instructions for reporting outages and down power lines.</p> <p>Post storm additional emails are sent with restoration updates, estimates of time and safety tips for managing outage.</p> <p>Information is shared on Company Facebook, X, news releases to media, postings on Companies' website, spokesperson media interviews and press releases to TV, radio and newspapers.</p>

Respondent	(i) Current notification for individual affected customers	(ii) Plans to add, expand, or modify notification systems	(iii) Barriers to expanding text or emails	(iv) Mass media communication procedures in place
<p><input checked="" type="radio"/> Appalachian Power Company and Wheeling Power Company</p>	<p>Identifies outages as planned or unplanned. Customers enroll in outage receive alerts via text through mobile app, voice message, and emails. Email alerts sent within 24 hours to customers whether they report outage or not.</p>	<p>Possibly expand with pre-storm text messages to customers. With each customer telephone call, email or in-person contact request is made for updated contact information.</p>	<p>Not all customers have or provide contact information either cell phone or email. Continue efforts by sending bill messages and inserts and targeted mailings to customers requesting contact information.</p>	<p>Outage updates on Facebook, X, Instagram and Nextdoor. Outage updates to media outlets storm response, outage counts and locations.</p>
<p>Optimum [Alice USA, Inc.] cable</p>	<p>Customer may call service line. Notifies affected customers by phone, email, text, social media and website informing of known outages and then restoration. Customers may need to perform an equipment reset.</p>		<p>Not all customers have or provide contact information either cell phone or email. Continue efforts by sending bill messages and inserts and targeted mailings to customers requesting contact information.</p>	
<p>Frontier West Virginia Inc. cable</p>	<p>Entire response confidential/blacked out.</p>	<p>Entire response confidential/blacked out.</p>	<p>Entire response confidential/blacked out.</p>	<p>Entire response confidential/blacked out.</p>
<p>Consumers Gas Utility Company</p>	<p>Notifies affected customers by going door-to-door. If customer is not home, a door hanger is left at the residence notifying the customer of the outage. Additionally, Consumers' employees assist in spreading outage information when the need arises.</p>	<p>Consumers has no immediate plans to change its current outage notification procedures.</p>	<p>Consumers believes a mass communication system to notify affected customers by email or text message is not necessary due to the small size of the company and would not be cost efficient.</p>	<p>In the event the company needs to notify mass communications media of an outage, the decision is made by company management depending on the circumstances of the situation.</p>

**EXHIBIT 2 – RESPONDENT PARTY PARTICIPANTS AND CONTACT
INFORMATION**

CASE NO. 24-0338-G-W-E-CTV-GI

Task Force Final Report – Meeting Participants

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CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE
CASE NO. 24-0338-G-W-E-CTV-GI

**PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION
OF WEST VIRGINIA
CHARLESTON**

CASE NO. 24-0338-G-W-E-CTV-GI

A General Investigation into notifications by utilities and cable providers regarding utility and cable service outages.

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, Steven Hamula, Counsel for the Public Service Commission of West Virginia, do hereby certify that a copy of the foregoing "Final Task Force Report" has been served upon the following parties of record electronically this the 31st day of July 2024.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steven Hamula', written over a horizontal line.

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