WHY ARE AREA CODES NEEDED AND WHAT IS THEIR PURPOSE?

Area codes are the portion of a telephone number that routes calls to their destination. When the area code is combined with the first three digits of a seven-digit local telephone number (known as the NXX code or Central Office code), a geographic address is formed that routes calls through the telephone network. The area code and NXX code together "tell" the call which central office station to go to, and the final four digits identify the specific individual customer line.

WHY ARE THERE NEW AREA CODES?

The demand for new telephone numbers has been growing at a rapid rate in recent years, thus resulting in a shortage of available numbers in many areas. A variety of factors are involved in this growing demand. Among them are population increases and the development of new technology in the form of fax machines, cellular phones, computer modems, pagers and many other electronic devices that require the use of telephone numbers. One example is the growth in wireless phone usage; estimates indicate that the number of cell phones in service in South Carolina approaches the population of South Carolina.

WHY WOULD ANOTHER AREA CODE BE NECESSARY WHERE I LIVE OR WORK?

A limited number of combinations of prefixes exist that are available to be used with an area code. Some prefixes are unavailable due to being used for public access information such as 911 or 411. Prefixes, also called codes, are assigned and are specific to geographic locations known as rate centers. A prefix that is assigned to one geographic location or rate center is not available in another rate center. Some rate centers run low on prefixes and require more prefixes. At some point, there are no additional prefixes that are available for assignment. When no more prefixes are available for assignment, more numbers must be made available, and this situation requires the addition of another area code.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN AN AREA CODE HAS BEEN EXHAUSTED?

When all of the NXX codes in an area code are assigned to telecommunications service providers, the area code is "exhausted," and a new area code must be implemented.

HOW ARE NEW AREA CODES PUT IN PLACE?

New area codes are usually implemented in one of the following ways:

- They can be implemented through a "geographic split." The geographic area using an existing area code is split into two parts; some telephone customers continue to be served through the existing area code while others must change to a new area code.

- New area codes can also be implemented through an "area code overlay." In this process, the new area code covers the same geographic areas as an existing code, but new customers in that area are assigned to the new, or overlay, area code.

HOW DO GEOGRAPHIC SPLITS AND AREA CODE OVERLAYS AFFECT THE WAY LOCAL CALLS ARE MADE?

Area code splits create new area codes by splitting a geographical region into new, smaller regions. These splits provide more prefixes for the telecommunications industry and its customers. Usually the splits result in two area codes, with one region keeping the same area code and the other region changing to a new area code.

With the split method of introducing a new area code, a given location will only have one area code.

An area code overlay is a form of area-code change that typically adds a second area code to the same geographic region. Therefore, multiple area codes can co-exist within the same geographic region. People with telephone numbers within the exhausted area code will retain their current telephone number(s) and area code. Individuals who request new or additional telephone numbers or telecommunications services may be given telephone numbers with the new overlaid area code.

WILL I BE AFFECTED BY AN AREA CODE CHANGE?

If you have a telephone number within an area code that is running out of prefixes, you will be affected by an area code change regardless of the area code change option implemented.

If an area code split is implemented, then some individuals will have to change their current area code to the new code. This depends on whether the individual telephone is located in the area designated for the new area code.

If an area code overlay is implemented, then individuals will be able to retain their current telephone number and area code. However, they will need to dial the area code and the telephone number for all local calls. This ten-digit dialing protocol is a change from the current seven-digit dialing that customers use to make local calls.

WHAT WILL THE NEW AREA CODE BE?

The new area code is selected by the North American Numbering Plan Administration (NANPA). NANPA has assigned 854 as the new area code for an overlay of the 843 area-code area.

WHO WILL GET THE NEW AREA CODE IN A CHANGE?

In response to a petition filed by the NANPA on behalf of the South Carolina Telecommunications industry, the Public Service Commission of S.C. approved the area code overlay for the 843 area. Those consumers who order new telephone numbers or services may receive the new area code.

WHY IS 10-DIGIT (AREA CODE + SEVEN-DIGIT NUMBER) DIALING NECESSARY WHEN AN AREA CODE OVERLAY IS IMPLEMENTED?

Ten-digit dialing is a regulatory requirement established for an overlay area code by the FCC in its Second Report and Order (FCC 96-333). Its purpose is 1) to mitigate any anti-competitive effects that would unfairly advantage incumbent providers and disadvantage new providers and their customers and 2) to ensure dialing parity between the two area codes.

This dialing requirement results from a concern that customers in the original area code and customers with the overlay area code would have different dialing arrangements for the same geographic area. Those in the original area code could reach a party in their same geographic area with a seven-digit call, while those in the overlay area code would have to dial 10 digits to reach the same party.

HOW DO CUSTOMERS IN AN OVERLAY AREA KNOW WHETHER THE CALLS THEY MAKE ARE LOCAL, LOCAL TOLL OR LONG DISTANCE?

For an overlay area, both local and local-toll calls are made by dialing 10 digits - the area code and the seven-digit phone number. The number of digits dialed does not reveal, or determine, whether the call is local or local toll. When in doubt, customers should check the information provided in their telephone directory before dialing.

For direct-dialed long-distance calls, the callers are required to dial "1" followed by the area code and the seven-digit phone number.

WILL THERE BE A CHANGE IN HOW I DIAL EMERGENCY CALLS TO 9-1-1?

No. Customers dial only three digits to reach 9-1-1. No additional digits will be required to make emergency calls.

WILL THERE BE A CHANGE IN HOW I DIAL OTHER N-1-1 PHONE NUMBERS?

No. Customers dial only three digits to call N-1-1 phone numbers such as 211, 311, 411, 511, 611, 711, and 811 if they are currently available in the area.

WHAT CAN INDIVIDUALS DO TO PREPARE FOR AN AREA CODE OVERLAY?

- Contact security or alarm vendors to update dial-up numbers to avoid an interruption of security routines and contacts.

- Reprogram equipment or features (i.e., automatic dial, speed-dial, call forwarding, modems for computer or internet dial-up access) to dial area code + seven-digit telephone numbers.

- Update items like stationery, checks, etc., to include your area code + telephone number.

- Start thinking of dialing the area code + telephone number for all calls.

- Advise families, friends etc., to dial the area code + telephone number for all calls.

- Provide your area code + telephone number, not just the telephone number.

- When asking for someone else's number, remember to ask for the area code, too.

- Remember that the previous area code and the new area code will co-exist within the same geographic region.

WHAT CAN BUSINESSES DO TO PREPARE FOR AN AREA CODE OVERLAY?

- Notify alarm service providers of the appropriate area code + seven-digit telephone number(s) so alarm service records and equipment can be updated as needed.

- Ensure security door and gate systems are reprogrammed to dial area code + seven-digit telephone number.

- Reprogram any call-forwarding, automatic-dial, or speed-dial features to dial area code + seven-digit telephone number.

- Test telephone equipment to determine if it can dial and receive area code + seven-digit telephone numbers. Questions regarding changes in telephone equipment should be directed to telephone equipment vendors.

- Update items like stationery, checks, business cards, advertisements, promotional items, brochures, internet web pages, catalogs etc., to include your area code + seven-digit telephone number.

- Instruct employees, coworkers, customers etc., to dial the area code + telephone number for all calls.

- Provide your area code + telephone number (not just the telephone number) to your business contacts.

HOW IS A NEW AREA CODE INTRODUCED IN AN OVERLAY?

An overlay area code is introduced in three steps. The steps are designed to guide consumers by familiarizing them with the new area code and dialing-plan change that is required with an overlay.

- **Formal 10-Digit Permissive Dialing:**

  During a determined formal permissive 10-digit dialing period, customers are encouraged to begin using the area code + the seven-digit number to place all calls within the area code, although calls will still complete if only the seven-digit number is dialed. During this time, safety systems, alarms, PBXs, fax machine calling lists, speed dialers, private-entry access systems, auto-dialers, and out-dialing lists on personal computers should be reprogrammed.

- **Mandatory 10-Digit Dialing:**

  Mandatory 10-digit dialing begins at the end of the formal permissive dialing period. Callers must use the area code + the seven-digit number for all calls within the area code. Calls incorrectly dialed using only seven digits will be referred to a recording announcement which will inform the calling party that it is necessary to dial the area code + the seven-digit telephone number to complete the call. This recorded announcement will remain indefinitely.

- **Introduction of New Overlay Area Code:**

  Numbers in the overlay area code are introduced one month after the start of mandatory 10-digit dialing begins.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF WE RUN OUT OF AREA CODES?

 If all of the available area codes are used, our dialing pattern would need to be expanded by one or more digits. Because changing the dialing plan in this manner would require significant time for transition and would involve substantial expense, the FCC has proposed a number of ways to slow down the consumption of available telephone numbers and thereby preserve the life of our current 10-digit dialing pattern for as long as possible.

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION ON AREA CODES?

You may contact the South Carolina Office of Regulatory Staff (ORS). Staff from the Consumer Services Division will be able to assist you with specific questions.

The Consumer Services Division can be reached by phone at 803-737-5230 (Columbia SC) or at 1-800-922-1531 (toll-free within South Carolina) during the hours of 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday (except for state holidays). You may also contact the Consumer Services Division by completing an On-Line Consumer Complaint/Inquiry Form at http://orsforms.sc.gov/WebContactEntryForm.asp

HOW CAN I CONTACT THE NORTH ARMERICAN NUMBER PLAN ADMINISTRATION?

 Information related to the Area Code Relief can also be found on the North American Number Plan Administration's website http://www.nanpa.com/relief_planning/FAQs_Area_Code_Relief.pdf