

Since passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the "deregulation" of cable television, consumers have seen their rates jump an average of 59 percent -- with some areas experiencing even more dramatic increases. The cost of cable modem service remains out of reach for many households, holding constant for years and selectively underserving rural and low-income Americans. The American people are watching the digital divide widen even as the need for access to high-speed networks increases.

The FCC, through this Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, recognizes that new video competition is entering the market, as phone companies (like AT&T and Verizon) begin to roll out television service. The Commission asks if the telephone companies are slowed or blocked in their expansion by the process of negotiating franchises -- the agreements that companies seeking to provide video services sign with local governments that set the terms for building cable television systems.

Does the franchising process need reform? Perhaps. However, the most important issue is not how to ensure the process is changed to suit the interests of telephone companies. Instead, the most important issue is how to ensure that the rights and services of local communities are protected and enriched. We should start with these desired outcomes and work backward to see if the process to deliver them can be improved. Local governments undoubtedly will -- and must -- play a key role in any future franchising process.

Though the franchising process has not been perfect, it has been a critical safeguard to protect the interests of consumers and citizens in our local communities. Now that the phone companies are building television systems, local communities are hungry for new competition that could drive down costs, increase options, provide access to local content and bring us closer to bridging the digital divide.

These franchise agreements guarantee that local governments control rights-of-way and obtain fair rents from the companies that dig them up to lay cable. They guarantee universal build-out of the technology and its advantages to every household in the community, not just affluent neighborhoods. They guarantee funding and facilities to provide public access television as well as other services like low-cost broadband for our schools and libraries.

In no other area of purchasing are consumers dictated into buying more of what they want or need as they are when getting cable or satellite services. As the air waves are owned by the people of this country, this is beyond ridiculous. In a competitive market, this would not be the case, and not only would customer service be better, customer preference of how their local news and channels were delivered, as well as independent programming and public channels, would have stronger influence on

cable and satellite companies. A company that does not have to respond to the satisfaction of its' customer base becomes a tyranny where there should be none-and a possible shill for propaganda. A company should be always responsible to its' customer base that provides its profit- not the other way around. There is surely a need for new providers of broadband and video content to enter existing markets, be they private or public. Competition is the very soul of true capitalism. Monopoly is not..it soon becomes fascist. The public must be allowed to lend their voice and vote to how new video and broadband systems will be implemented and what features will be available to meet future needs.