

The FCC is weighing a new rule that would give phone companies yet another way to reach into your pocket to pad their profits.

It has proposed a so-called "reform" of the Universal Service Fund (USF), a program that has helped secure telephone access for millions of Americans, and which is funded via a small fee in our monthly phone bills. (Look for a line item labeled something like "universal service charge" or "federal government surcharge" and you'll find the fee.)

The program's goals are noble but outdated. So the FCC is looking to funnel these funds toward broadband infrastructure rather than phone lines. There's just one problem. The FCC has proposed rules that would allow phone companies like AT&T and Verizon to extract billions more from consumers with no accountability.

If we don't get the FCC to change its plan, carriers would have free rein to add up to \$4.50 more to your monthly bill. In an era of \$100 "triple-pay" packages, do AT&T and Verizon need more of our money?

Meanwhile, those Americans who can least afford higher bills and who are less likely to have broadband — the poor and the elderly — are the ones who would bear the greatest burden of this rate increase. Communications giants like the Ma Bell (AT&T) and Verizon (the two Twin Bells) along with other phone companies should be held accountable for any public money they receive.