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Commentary:

Reform telecom laws to promote investment and innovation

By Rep. RYAN HANSEN
Guest Commentary

DO YOU remember when the Internet and email became a regular part of your life? Or when you got hooked on your cell phone? Maybe you've come to rely on new-fangled gadgets and gizmos like blackberries or other wireless devices. If you stop to think about it, you'll realize an astonishing thing — just ten years ago these technologies had not yet taken off.

The world of communications has progressed at lightening speed, yet government regulations from 1996 are still dictating the direction of this modern age. It's time for Congress to update our telecom laws — and nothing short of a comprehensive overhaul that gets the best out of all providers will do the trick.

America has a proud heritage of innovating, but the real secret to our success is our conviction that head-to-head investment and competition delivers the best products and services. Personally, I believe that consumer choice is better suited to pick an industry's winners and losers than the heavy hand of government. Given the many companies in the market today, I believe it's time to free the telecommunications industry to compete on the same market-driven terms that just about every U.S. industry thrives under today.

I know our legislators are addressing a number of important issues, but I hope that Congress won't underestimate the importance of updating our nation's telecom laws.

Why does this issue need to be on the fast track? Because a strong information economy will help deliver a strong U.S. economy and allow New Hampshire's more rural areas to reap the rewards of that growth. To be competitive in the global marketplace, our businesses need access to powerful communications tools and technologies. As it stands now, America's global broadband deployment ranking is 13th in the world — a sad fact considering our nation invented broadband.

New Hampshire's citizens consistently rank at the top of the list of the most "wired" — those with ready access to Internet. This honor does not extend to all parts of our state and has left many rural communities unserved by a high-speed connection. This is not just a "North County problem." Many communities in southern New Hampshire do not have access to a high-speed connection. Open competition for these customers will extend this service more quickly and allow these citizens the opportunities this technology affords most of us, including the ability to work from home, to use their cell

phones in roadside emergencies, place calls to loved ones over the internet or to watch Red Sox unveil the World Series banner on opening day on their laptops.

A modern, U.S. telecom policy that embraces market forces and puts consumers, rather than the government, in charge will help speed broadband deployment and set our nation and our state back on track as an information technology leader.

The best way to ensure we can speed the arrival of the full potential of the Information Age is to adopt a modern telecom policy that encourages all companies to invest and compete vigorously and directly with one another, no matter what technology they use, to offer us an array of diverse voice, video and data services. It also is essential that all telecom providers uphold vital social objectives that ensure the strength and security of our communities — from critical public safety needs like 911 to supporting universal service, which ensures affordable access to a dial tone for rural and low-income residents.

According to a study by Criterion Economics, increased broadband deployment will not only stimulate small business growth, it could generate as many as 1.2 million jobs. In the next five years alone, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has reported that market-based competition in the telecommunications sector could add \$634 billion to U.S. GDP. Following its detailed study, the organization vowed to make updating U.S. telecom laws a priority.

New Hampshire residents deserve the best that telecom has to offer — from reinvigorating local economies to taking full advantage of all that the Information Age has to offer. I hope Sen. John Sununu, as a member of the Senate Science, Commerce and Transportation Committee, and Rep. Charlie Bass, as a member of House Committee on Energy and Commerce, will work to put reform on the fast track. We need to update the nation's telecom laws to encourage vigorous investment and competition and allow consumers to determine for themselves which technologies and services best meet our needs.

Rep. Ryan Hansen, R-Milford, works for PC Connection in Merrimack and runs Civic Media Corp., a small publishing company in Milford.