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Telecom

Sen. Ensign, Rep. Pickering Discuss Their Reform Agendas

by [Chloe Albanesius](#)

Sen. **John Ensign** on Tuesday offered more detail on a telecommunications bill he is crafting and said he will seek "as much free-market thinking" in telecom reform as possible.

It is imperative that the "patchwork quilt of regulation" in the states is eliminated, the Nevada Republican said at a Capitol Hill gathering sponsored by the [Progress and Freedom Foundation](#) (PFF). Otherwise, foreign applications like the Internet telephony offered by Skype Technologies "will completely drive customers away from our own domestic carriers."

Ensign also criticized the current system for granting local cable franchises. "You cannot continue with a regulatory scheme that has 30,000 franchise authorities across the country" because that scheme was put in place to protect against monopolies that no longer exist, he said.

Ensign pushed to "free up the cable companies" on the franchising issue. When asked to elaborate on that idea, an Ensign aide said the senator was making a "general statement about government overregulation" and said further details would be available when the bill is introduced in July.

In terms of how localities can recoup revenue from lost franchise fees, Ensign said his office has "not finalized the exact parts" of how to deal with that issue. It is inevitable, however, that local communities are "going to have to restructure" either via technology or government reform, so "they're going to have to get used to a different source of revenue."

He emphasized the need to be technology neutral. "We have to get out of the way of innovators."

When asked about the fund to provide all Americans with access to telecommunications service, Ensign said Senate Commerce Committee Chairman **Ted Stevens**, R-Alaska, who "has a bit of a passion" for that universal service fund, will handle the issue.

At a later PFF session, Rep. **Charles (Chip) Pickering**, R-Miss., acknowledged that the Senate likely will "have a higher priority and emphasis on universal service" but said the "current system is not sustainable ... fair or equitable." He warned against depending too much on subsidies that could stifle competition.

The House priority will be Internet-protocol-based reform, Pickering said. The chambers then will have to address how to "marry new technologies and new services

with a modernization or reform of universal service."

It is unclear whether the House will take up IP-based reform legislation before the August congressional recess, Pickering said, but he believes "it is possible" to pass a bill during the current session of Congress.

On the franchising issue, Pickering said lawmakers could "do it at the state or federal level."

Pickering later said House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman **Joe Barton**, R-Texas, and Energy and Commerce Telecommunications and the Internet Subcommittee Chairman **Fred Upton**, R-Mich., have been working toward a consensus on the transition to digital television but "don't have a full agreement."

Should lawmakers not address digital TV legislation until September, that would free House members to delve more deeply into telecom reform in July, Pickering said.