

Viewpoint

Revision long overdue

Broadband bills could lead to greater consumer choices

By Paul E. Arbogast

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Recently, a broadband bill was introduced in the U.S. Senate that holds considerable power to spur investment and competition in the communications industry, speeding a flurry of consumer choices and economic benefits across West Virginia and the nation.

The Broadband Investment and Consumer Choice Act, proposed by Senator Ensign and McCain, is a critical step toward comprehensive communications reform – which is long overdue, considering our U.S. telecom policy was last revised when the Internet was in its infancy.

West Virginia's Sen. Rockefeller has also acknowledged just how dramatically the world of communications has changed by introducing his bill, the Video Choice Act. Sen. Rockefeller's legislation would effectively enable telephone companies to send video over upgraded network systems, spurring the development of next-generation networks and providing consumers across our state with enhanced choices.

While this bill is more narrowly focused than Sen. Ensign's Broadband Choice Act, it too signifies a positive move away from government-managed competition toward consumer-driven marketplace.

Today, the need for comprehensive communications legislation is strikingly clear. In 1996, when our laws were last updated, Internet and cell phone use was far from mainstream, and was hardly a consideration for lawmakers. In the new communications world we live in, the sound of cell phone chirps surrounds us, new wireless devices, like Blackberries, are essential gadgets we never could have conceived of even a few years ago. But even bigger and better things are around the corner – that is, if our Senate rallies around the Broadband Choice Act and if our own Sen. Rockefeller continues to pursue legislation that encourages all providers to compete head-to-head.

How, specifically, would our communications environment be even better as a result of Sen. Ensign's Broadband Choice Act? For one thing, consumers would be in the driver's seat choosing the products and service most useful to them, rather than the government making these personal decisions.

Motivated by consumer choice, companies would race to develop the most inventive and competitively priced broadband innovations, including voice, video and Internet technologies. High-speed Internet deployment rates would accelerate, helping our nation improve its poor 16th place ranking in the industrialized world.

Moreover, Americans would enjoy a new era of broadband-driven opportunities, from telecommunicating and talking courses in the comfort of your home to benefiting from new telemedicine options and choices for Americans with disabilities.

In West Virginia – where many areas are rural – expanded broadband opportunities could have an astonishing effect on our local economies and our quality of life.

Small businesses aiming to improve their efficiency, expand their reach, and increase their bottom line would be able to realize these goals with the new wave of broadband innovations

sparked by this legislation. And – more good news for West Virginians – small business expansion has proven to be the largest source of job growth in the U.S., so triggering expansion through technology will reap big results.

We are fortunate in West Virginia to have a senator who understands the great importance of enhancing our technological infrastructure. I urge Sen. Rockefeller to keep up the good work pursuing modern communications legislation, and I hope the senator will also demonstrate his support for the Broadband Choice Act.

I sincerely believe the residents of West Virginia would like to see a new era of broadband advances. Our consumers and local economies deserve nothing less.

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