

Support Community Internet and Municipal Broadband

February 22, 2005

To whom it may concern:

The signatories to this letter oppose any state or federal policies that would impose a blanket ban or significant impediment to any city, county or state entity from providing broadband services to their citizens. We call on all states considering such legislation to reject it as harmful to the interests of their citizens.

The President, the Congress, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) have all identified the availability of competitive, affordable high-speed Internet broadband access for all Americans as a national priority. The President has set an aggressive goal of 2007 for universal access in the United States. Without the contributions of local governments, it is doubtful that we will achieve universal deployment at all, let alone in two years.

Broadband access has become increasingly essential to economic growth, healthcare, and education. What electric power and telephones were to the 20th Century, broadband access will be to the 21st. Towns that don't have affordable broadband lose jobs. Their children suffer a serious disadvantage in college or in the workforce, where fluency with computers and the Internet is increasingly assumed as a matter of course. Rural towns without broadband cannot take advantage of new breakthroughs in telemedicine or the economic opportunities created by telecommuting. Even in crowded urban areas, the availability of broadband can vary from one neighborhood to another, stranding one neighborhood on the wrong side of the "digital divide" while two, three or even four broadband providers serve their neighbors.

Municipalities have a valuable role to play in filling this gap. Municipalities have a long history of providing necessary services for citizens and stimulating local businesses. In the 20th century, municipalities built power plants and telephone lines when private services did not move fast enough. Our competitive power and telecom industries today demonstrate that these services by municipalities complement private industry rather than compete with it. In addition, municipalities have a long history of spending money to benefit their citizens and encourage business development. Municipalities across the country have invested public money in convention centers, health clinics, and community colleges not to make money, but to bring business opportunities, healthcare, and education to their citizens. They should have the same opportunity to offer public hotspots and broadband access.

Opponents of municipal broadband have raised the strawman argument of governments monopolizing broadband or discriminating against competing private networks. Every signatory to this letter agrees that federal, state and local policies should encourage deployment of broadband networks in a competitive and technologically neutral manner. The reality has been that local governments only spend money to build systems when they believe a need exists, and that these local systems encourage private companies to deploy and invest in competitive systems.

In conclusion, the question of municipal broadband is one that effects us all as a nation. In the last five years, the United States has fallen from an international leader in broadband to 13th among industrialized nations. Many of the countries that are now ahead of us—Canada, Japan, Korea—have used municipal systems as one important element in their broadband strategy. As a nation, we cannot afford to cut off any successful strategy if we want to remain internationally competitive. Nor should any state stand in the way of local governments serving the needs of local citizens.

Sincerely,

National Organizations

Alliance for Community Media
Association for Community Networking
Center for Creative Voices in Media
Center for Digital Democracy
Common Cause
Consumer Action
Consumer Federation of America
Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety
Consumers Union
EDUCAUSE
Free Press
Media Access Project
Media Channel
New America Foundation
Office of Communication of
United Church of Christ
Prometheus Radio Project
US PIRG

Community Networking Projects

Austin Wireless City Project
Champaign-Urbana Community Wireless
Network (CUWiN)
Center for Neighborhood Technology
Detroit Wireless Project
Newbury Open.Net
NYC Wireless

Prominent Regional, State and Local Groups

Akaku: Maui Community TV
Alaska PIRG
Amburgey & Associates, P.C.
Arizona PIRG
Baller Herbst Law Group
Borough of Kutztown

California PIRG
Cape Cod Community Media Center
CCTV Center for Media & Democracy
Chicago Access Network Television
Chicago Consumer Coalition
Chicago Media Action
City of Fairborn - GATV10
City of Geneva, Illinois
Community Access Partners of San
Buenaventura
EFF-Austin
F2C: Freedom to Connect
Fiber For Our Future
Florida Municipal Electric Association
Florida PIRG
Georgia PIRG
Get Illinois Online
Illinois Community Technology
Consortium
Illinois Municipal Utilities Association
Iowa Association of Municipal Utilities
Lafayette Pro Fiber
Lowell Telecommunications Corporation
Malden Access TV
Mass PIRG
Massachusetts Consumers' Coalition
Media Alliance
Mountain Area Information Network
North Carolina Consumers Council, Inc.
PA-Fiber
Penn PIRG
PIRG in Michigan
Public Access Corporation of DC
Public News Service
Reclaim the Media
SCAN Community Media
The Peoples Channel 8
Vermont PIRG
Virginia Citizens Consumer Council
WCCA TV 13 "The People's Channel"