

Getting the best technology here, now

*Published in the Chronicle-Independent, January 30, 2006*

I have signed on in support of the South Carolina Competitive Cable Services Act, legislation now under consideration in the General Assembly which promises to change the landscape of cable services in our state. Currently, cable television companies negotiate exclusive agreements with the hundreds of individual cities and counties in South Carolina. This drawn-out manner of securing service agreements can delay the ability of our citizens to enjoy the benefits of technological innovations, such as Internet Protocol Television, which now allows video services to be carried over phone lines.

Under the current system, cable service providers have little incentive to invest in digital infrastructure. Incumbent providers also lack motivation to offer customers attractive prices and services. As a House Member, I commonly hear complaints from constituents about ever-increasing cable bills and frustrating experiences with the cable company's service department. During a time when competition has lowered prices for phone and internet services, cable prices have increased nationally by a rate of 37.5 percent during the past five years, according to a Federal Communications Commission survey.

Just as cable companies have, in recent years, branched out to provide phone and Internet services, the Competitive Cable Services Act would allow phone companies and others to enter into the cable television business and compete with existing companies. The proposed legislation would allow companies to offer video and cable services through a franchise issued at the state level rather than through the various locally negotiated service arrangements.

Federal Communications Commission data indicates that consumers would benefit from a 27 percent price decrease in cable rates where there is direct competition. Texas passed legislation of this sort last year, and there is already evidence that consumers in that state are reaping significant benefits. In one example, an incumbent cable provider responded to a new competitor's low-cost cable package by introducing a 240-channel offering complete with high-speed Internet access for half what those services would have previously cost. This enhanced service package is, in fact, less expensive than what the television package, alone, had been prior to passage of the legislation.

There are some concerns I want to see addressed as we work on this legislation. Customer service requirements should be at least as stringent as those required of current cable providers. However, there is speculation that federal regulation on this issue might soon come along to preempt any new laws approved here in South Carolina or in other states. I am also concerned about how the bill, as it now stands, could be enacted without coming into conflict with state constitutional provisions that guarantee local government control over operations on local rights-of-way and public property. I want to make sure that the Competitive Cable Services Act would still allow us to keep the authority and initiative to handle our local matters locally.

On the whole, I believe the legislation would empower us at the local level because it could complement what we are already doing in Kershaw County. In our county we are seeing pioneering programs that supply laptop computers to our high school freshmen. Think how much more successful such an important program might be if the households that are now receiving cable routinely received powerful Internet services for the same as, or even considerably less than, what they now pay for cable television, alone. The city of Camden is on the cutting edge of providing free wireless Internet services downtown. Consider what we might accomplish if competing companies were also making significant investments in our technological infrastructure.

Above all, I want to see powerful broadband capabilities come to Kershaw County to enhance services for those who are already connected and reach further into outlying areas that are not properly served. The Competitive Cable Services Act promises South Carolinians a better way of tapping into the riches of the digital world. The bill that is now before us may still need some fine-tuning, but I do believe that when it comes to cable services in South Carolina it's high time we adjusted our picture.