

Don't Make Community Internet Illegal

Broadband access has become increasingly essential to economic growth, healthcare, and education. Texas towns that don't have affordable broadband lose jobs. Their children suffer a serious disadvantage in college or in the workforce. In March 2004, Texas Agriculture Commissioner Susan Combs suggested that lack of access to "affordable and competitive telecommunications services" has impeded **rural economic development** in the state. Noting that high-speed Internet access increasingly has become a business necessity, the commissioner touted broadband expansion as a way of promoting growth in commerce and tourism and expanding health-care options for medically underserved regions of the state.

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."

Municipalities have a valuable role to play in filling this gap. Many cities across America are investigating and implementing municipal wireless and broadband networks. Some are even reducing the cost of deployment using wireless Internet, known as WiFi, to reach everyone in the community. HB 789 prohibits municipalities from providing this essential service to their citizens. HB 789 effectively cements the dominant telephone and dominant cable broadband duopoly.

Opponents of municipal broadband have raised the argument of governments monopolizing broadband or discriminating against competing private networks. 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. One analogy: bus systems did not drive automobile dealerships out of business.

The President, the Congress, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the State of Texas have all identified the availability of competitive, affordable high-speed internet broadband access as a priority. The President has set an aggressive goal of 2007 for universal access in the United States.

The Bottom Line

Affordable broadband access is vital to Texas' future. Many Texans are being left behind as dominant telephone and cable companies focus their efforts on rolling out services to high profit areas. Texas cannot afford to cut off any successful broadband strategy. State law should not make it illegal for a municipality to offer broadband services to its citizens.