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SCHAKOWSKY RAISES CONCERNS ABOUT CABLE BILL

SAYS COPE ACT COULD RAISE RATES, CUT OUT SERVICE AREAS, AND HURT CONSUMERS; VOWS TO INTRODUCE AMENDMENT TO PROTECT RESIDENTS FROM BAD SERVICE AND PRIVACY INVASIONS

WASHINGTON, DC -- U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky, ranking member on the Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection, today raised concerns about the Communications Opportunity, Promotion, and Enhancement Act in a mark-up before the Energy and Commerce Committee. Schakowsky said the bill would take away local control of cable services, and it could raise rates and deprive some services areas.

Representative Schakowsky's full opening statement is below:

No one is questioning the need for consumer choice and competition in cable services. Those are important goals. Currently, most communities are served by the cable industry's quasi-monopolies. However, "competition" in cable shouldn't have the effect of raising rates, cutting consumer protections, reducing educational and local access programming, and eliminating local rights. But that is what this bill, as it is currently written, will do. "Competition" shouldn't be about providing lucrative markets with several cable service options and leaving those in poorer neighborhoods with low-quality service and ever increasing cable bills - which, again, is what the COPE Act would allow.

I have heard from every municipality in my district and they are all concerned about what will happen if the COPE Act becomes law. While there may have been problems with local franchises, this bill is a classic case of throwing the baby out with the bath water. It would take away nearly all local rights and control over how new cable services are rolled out - and how old ones are maintained. Telling them you're coming to town is not enough - there has to be some recourse for towns and consumers that get raw deals. Do we really think the Federal Communications Commission should be charged with resolving consumer complaints? Is the FCC going to come out to Skokie, Illinois and resolve problems that may arise concerning the town's public right-of-way? And, does the FCC have the resources - both in budget and personnel - to do so?

I am also greatly concerned that there are not adequate protections in this bill for the Internet as we know it. We have already been told by the telecom industry that they plan to operate their own form of censorship, slowing down or speeding up delivery of content depending on its relationship to the provider. I am concerned about emails being blocked from advocacy groups and the startups being shut down by high fees to get their websites delivered at an adequate speed, to name just a couple examples. Again, we have been warned and if we don't do something to stop it now, the freedom and innovation that has made the Internet what it is today will be lost.

The telecommunications industry has been blinded by the dollar signs in their eyes and it is our duty as legislators to remind them that their profits come with the price of being responsible to communities, being responsible to consumers, and being good corporate citizens. I urge my colleagues to agree that as we consider the COPE Act today, we must consider what harm this bill will do to our communities and our constituents if it is not improved. I will be offering an amendment to help maintain state rights to protect residents from bad service and privacy invasions and I urge my colleagues to support my amendment.