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Cable franchising a concern

Section: News Proposed legislation that would allow cable companies to obtain a statewide franchise could cost Oak Ridge about \$400,000 a year, City Manager Jim O'Connor said Monday. City officials say they oppose the legislation, which has been pushed by AT&T and BellSouth, because it could take away local control of revenues, require governments to fund public access channels, and weaken consumer protections.

On Monday morning, O'Connor was at "Breakfast with the Legislators, a monthly event sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Oak Ridge. Monday's breakfast featured state Sen. Randy McNally, R-Oak Ridge, and state Rep. Jim Hackworth, D-Clinton.

With an "unprecedented" field of lobbyists taking sides on the franchising issue, officials and lobbyists are preparing for a major battle in the Tennessee General Assembly in Nashville.

"It's going to be a bloodletting," said Bill Nolan, Oak Ridge's state lobbyist.

At issue is whether to allow cable companies to obtain a statewide franchise, rather than negotiate agreements with city and county governments. "That should be negotiated at the local level," O'Connor said.

In Oak Ridge, a non-exclusive franchise agreement with Comcast allows the cable company access to city rights of way, including streets, alleys and utility poles.

It also requires Comcast to serve all city customers, rather than "cherry picking" some neighborhoods that might be more profitable, O'Connor said.

In return, Comcast pays the city about \$400,000 a year - or the equivalent of about six police officers - the city manager said.

Even though the proposed state legislation could contain a hold-harmless provision, O'Connor said city officials are worried about how much they might lose.

Proponents of statewide franchising say it could allow more competition and lower rates, McNally said. But O'Connor challenged that argument, saying, in part, that Oak Ridge's non-exclusive franchise agreements already allow competition.