

# Don't be misled on cable law

April 15, 2007

The experiences are familiar to many cable television customers throughout the Mid-South: Channels that go fuzzy for unexplained reasons. Bills that go up with little or no warning. Calls seeking customer service that go nowhere fast.

Despite all the frustrations cable customers have experienced, they should resist the siren call of AT&T.

The giant telecommunications company has a bill pending before the Tennessee General Assembly that would profoundly change the competitive landscape of the cable television industry in this state.

And not in a good way.

The company's pitch is hard to resist, particularly for those of us who've been on the verge of hurling our remotes into our TV screens on more than one occasion. If the so-called "Competitive Cable and Video Service Act" passes, AT&T officials would be able to avoid negotiating franchise agreements with individual city and county governments and provide cable service throughout Tennessee.

AT&T says customers would benefit from increased competition, which sounds great on the surface.

Comcast's 220,000 Memphis customers have endured a comedy of billing errors over the last few months. Many of those customers would no doubt like to see someone -- anyone -- give Comcast a run for its money.

But the bill would strip local governments of their ability to regulate cable company operations, which could potentially make a bad situation worse.

As the law is now written, a cable provider is required to get a franchise agreement from each city or county in which it chooses to operate. This gives cities and counties leverage to dictate certain conditions to companies.

Like where and how the companies may install their equipment along streets and other public property.

Like whether certain channels within a service area will be dedicated to providing community service or educational programming. And like whether a company will be required to provide service to the entire community, or just select parts of its choosing.

Local governments also have the ability to set standards for acceptable levels of customer service, although some clearly do a better job of that than others.

Under the bill as drafted, all of those provisions would be weakened or stripped away entirely.

The consequences are easy to imagine: Ugly metal boxes housing cable switching equipment sprouting unchecked along city streets. Channels like the award-winning one operated by

Germantown High School being eliminated because they don't fit a company's competitive strategy.

Affluent urban neighborhoods getting the best service providers can offer, while customers in lower-income or rural areas pay jacked-up rates or get no service at all.

And local governments would have even less control over customer complaints than they do now. Perhaps the Tennessee Regulatory Authority could provide guidance for communities that want to strengthen their customer service standards, but stripping local governments of that authority seems like an unnecessary step at this time.

As Richard Locker reports in today's Viewpoint section, legislators are going to attempt to work out a compromise between AT&T and the cable companies, local governments and consumer groups that oppose the bill as it's drafted. It won't be easy. If AT&T wants a shortcut around dealing with cities and counties, there may be no real middle ground.

Legislators shouldn't take regulatory control away from the level of government that is closest to the people.