

## **Statewide cable franchise bill should be defeated**

Tennessee lawmakers should join those of 12 other states and defeat a bill that would grant AT&T a statewide cable TV franchise. There is no reason the telecommunications giant can't live by the current rules that give control over cable franchising to local municipalities. Only local communities can best decide what needs to be done in their communities.

Under current law, cable TV companies must negotiate local franchise agreements with each municipality where they want to operate. The franchise agreements give the municipality the opportunity to negotiate fees, system build out and rights of way terms. Current law also has more stringent financial requirements such as construction bonding requirements that protect taxpayers from the cost of construction problems.

If the current bills, Senate Bill 1933 and House Bill 1421, are passed, AT&T and other large providers will gain a huge advantage over other cable companies and over the individual best interests of local municipalities. Cities will lose substantial control over public rights of way and acquire significant liability for damages caused by cable company construction.

AT&T also would gain the right to cherry-pick where it wanted to build its cable systems. It would be allowed to bypass less profitable areas now required by local franchise agreements. The company would be allowed to place refrigerator-size equipment cabinets anywhere they like along public rights of way, including in front of people's homes.

The bills before the General Assembly would weaken consumer protection, limit local municipalities' control over cable system construction and likely would reduce local franchise municipal revenue. The arrangement is a great for AT&T and a step backward for local governments and consumers.

The city of Jackson already has invited AT&T to come to our community and compete with its other cable providers. It will be granted the same fair treatment as other providers and the public interest will be protected. We fail to see any advantage to the city or to local residents to give AT&T a free pass to operate with a heavy hand in Jackson or anywhere else in Tennessee. Cable competition is a good thing. So is consumer protection and municipal authority to control what happens in our community. The current cable franchising laws are working well. They should be left as they are.