

Cable industry fires broadside at AT&T Tennessee

By [Milt Capps](#) - 12-06-2007

The battle over statewide video franchising took a harsh turn yesterday, when the cable industry delivered a stinging rebuke of AT&T Tennessee President Gregg Morton and those working with him to convince the General Assembly to change current law.

Tennessee Cable Telecommunications Association President Stacey Briggs accused Morton in a letter ([copies of her letter](#) were quickly circulated to news media) of having misrepresented facts at a speech given Tuesday at David Lipscomb University.

In her letter, Briggs accused Morton and his staff of describing disputed issues in ways that Briggs said are "misleading" and "untrue."

At Lipscomb, Morton implied that the cable industry had created onerous administrative impediments to AT&T and its allies' placing pro-reform ads on cable systems in the state.

Briggs' letter criticizes Morton for claiming AT&T could not get any ads placed, noting that TV4US, a group widely regarded as an AT&T proxy, placed ads on cable systems that ran in major Tennessee markets during last spring's legislative battle.

Briggs also criticized as invalid AT&T's continued argument that the process of winning video franchises city-by-city or county-by-county is too cumbersome for a company like AT&T, which owns a single network. Briggs said current FCC rules and invitations from local leaders mean that AT&T could quickly get local franchises, without reform legislation.

When reached for comment late Wednesday by *NashvillePost.com*, Morton was away from his office and had not read the letter, but had heard enough about it to say, "Basically, it sounds as though [Briggs has] called me and other representatives of AT&T a liar, which I strongly take issue with."

He added, "I'm not going to get into a mud-slinging fight with Stacey Briggs or anyone else on this issue. What I want to talk about is the facts."

All of this comes just a day after *NashvillePost.com* reported that new House and Senate leaders have [stepped forward to push reform legislation](#), beginning formally in January.

Briggs also attacked AT&T's oft-repeated argument that the process of winning video franchises city-by-city or county-by-county is too cumbersome for a company like AT&T, which operates a single unified network.

Briggs said current FCC rules and invitations from local leaders mean that AT&T could quickly get local franchises, without reform legislation. Also, while AT&T representatives often minimize issues remaining to be resolved, resistance was still strong

when legislators and AT&T finally pulled the plug on the reform effort.

At this point, it bears noting that up to the moment [reform legislation died in May](#), a steady procession of bills, amendments and concepts seemed to pour from every nook and cranny of Legislative Plaza. At times, opponents' efforts to slow debate, plus and erratic signals from all parties, produced confusion as to what had been agreed, what hadn't and who, if anyone, "cared."

Morton promised a full response to Briggs' letter. Meanwhile, he stressed that "AT&T supports language that addresses concerns that have been expressed" regarding key issues, among them: localities' desire that AT&T pay franchise fees "directly to local government and not to the state"; and, ensuring that "nothing in the [proposed] legislation impacts local government in [terms of] their ability to manage and police their rights-of-way."

Not content to let Briggs accusations of distorting facts stand alone, Morton also said he believes the cable industry has distorted AT&T's position on many issues.

As an example, he noted that cable supporters insist that AT&T would essentially do away with public-education-government access channels that are highly valued in some communities, including Metro Nashville.

Morton said access to PEG channels would actually be increased under AT&T's U-verse video programming, because viewers anywhere could watch PEG programming from neighboring counties, as well as their own. Morton added, "We are working to address [remaining] concerns expressed by the PEG community and I am confident that we will be able to do that."