

Mr. Speaker, my goal in Congress is for the Federal Government to be a full partner in helping our communities be more livable. I discussed improving livability of the physical environment on this floor dealing with transportation infrastructure, managing our water resources in a more rational fashion, and reducing gun violence. These are all elements the Federal Government can profoundly influence in our communities and provide the quality of life that our citizens desire and deserve.

A critical part of that well-planned infrastructure for a livable community is access to the global economy through Internet connections. That is why I have strongly supported the E-rate, which helps schools and libraries connect to the Internet with subsidized costs.

The Internet is to America's tomorrow what the highways and railroad systems have been in the past. It has had the potential to change our communities and landscapes in ways that are truly profound.

There is an Internet drama unfolding now which has profound implications for how the Federal Government can help communities realize their vision of a livable future. I am referring to high-speed broad-band Internet access via the cable systems which are part of the households of many Americans. This issue is being played out as the consolidation of America's cable delivery system is almost complete, featuring ownership by telecommunication giants like AT&T which recently purchased the TCI cable system, America's largest.

Ironically, 7 years after the passage of legislation to deregulate cable, titled the Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act of 1992, the consolidation in the industry is resulting in fewer choices for cable consumers. In fact, by this time next year, only New York and Los Angeles will have more than one cable operator. Why is this important?

The majority of Americans are still in the horse and buggy era of Internet connections, by connecting on the Internet through their phone lines. Cable has the potential of moving millions of American households into the equivalent of a high-speed rail Internet connection. As we make this quantum leap from the horse and buggy technology to truly the information super highway, we must ensure that this new service provides the same type of competition that has inspired better service options at lower costs for long-distance and for Internet service over the phone lines.

What happens if these cable systems are owned by just a few companies? Soon, AT&T will provide cable service for almost two-thirds of American households. We get a little glimpse of this in my hometown of Portland, Oregon, where AT&T is the only cable provider in our entire metropolitan area. As a condition of the approval of the merger with TCI, the citizen advisors in my community made the recommendation to our elected officials that there be competition for high-speed Internet connections over the cable platform.

AT&T has chosen to argue strenuously that it should have a monopoly. The company insisted that everybody have to pay for AT&T's Internet service, regardless of whether or not people want to use it. Forcing people to use its service or pay twice for Internet connection is an integral part of AT&T's business plan.

In fact, it is such an important part that when the elected officials chose to support the recommendation of our citizens, AT&T warned, in not very subtle language, that the city better have a big legal budget, and in fact, sued, trying to win in the Federal court what AT&T could not justify to Portland's citizens and to its elected officials.

But AT&T lost in a powerfully worded decision by a highly respected and moderate to conservative local jurist. Yet AT&T is continuing its appeal and in the meantime is threatening not to invest in our community that had the temerity to suggest that we ought to have competition.

While the company's influence is being felt in Washington, D.C., it is time for the administration and Congress to protect connectivity, competition, and choice. This is a national issue, not just Portland. Cities all over the country are dealing with this, in L.A., San Francisco, Seattle, Minneapolis to Boston, Atlanta, Chicago and Detroit. Just last week, Broward County in Florida passed a resolution just like Portland's.

I will be introducing legislation this week to help local communities in their quest to determine their own technological future through competition, connectivity, and choice. Congress, the FCC, the private sector and local governments, everybody has a role to play. We all must fight to protect the competitive forces that so many of us say are important. The stakes are high not just for this vital telecommunication link, but also to prove that we are serious about making competition work for more livable communities.