



Pulling the Plug on Local Internet

Guess who wants to stop you from getting universal, citywide wireless cheaper than you get it now?

By [Steven Levy](#)
Newsweek

July 18 issue - Pete Sessions, a Texas member of the House, believes in states' rights. But he also thinks that there are situations so extreme that Congress must slap down state and local government initiatives. One such case: localities that offer citizens free or low-cost Internet service. Idealists may view extending high-speed Internet as a boon to education, an economic shot in the arm and a vital component in effective emergency services. Sessions (who once worked for telecom giant SBC) sees it as local-government meddling in the marketplace—"trying to pick winners and losers," he says—and thus justifies federal meddling to stop elected officials from giving their constituents a stake in the 21st century.

The Sessions bill is only one shot in the battle over municipal wireless, or muni Wi-Fi. In hundreds of communities, public officials have concluded that the Internet is an essential service. They see that their residents are either offered prices that are too high or are not offered services at all. They are aware that while our nation stumbles in high-speed-Internet adoption, other countries make sure consumers can get connected at lower prices (Japanese and South Korean users pay about half what we do). "We are asleep at the wheel," says Andrew Rasiej, a candidate for public advocate in New York City.

Using "mesh" networks that run on the Wi-Fi wireless standard, cities can deliver the Internet affordably to everyone within their boundaries. "We can cover a city for a fraction of the cost of the traditional providers," says Ron Sege of Tropos, a company that installs shoe-box-size devices that beam the Net from street lamps. This enables cities like Philadelphia to launch nonprofit efforts to make whole neighborhoods into hotspots: public spaces get free access, and citizens who use the service at home or around town are billed less than \$20 a month. "We all have to compete in a knowledge economy," explains Dianah Neff, the city's chief information officer, who says the current providers focus excessively on the affluent.

The telecom and cable giants that sell broadband Internet have mobilized to stop organizers like Neff. The likes of Verizon, SBC and Comcast are lobbying hard and donating big. They argue that taxpayer-funded competition makes the marketplace unfair (ironic, since those firms owe their dominance to government-granted monopolies). Then they claim that cities are too unsophisticated to pull off such projects (so why are they worried?). They fund think tanks that churn out white papers with titles like "Municipal Networks: The Wrong Solution." And they are racking up successes—14 states so far have passed laws that constrain localities in muni Wi-Fi efforts. In Pennsylvania, only a grass-roots protest from Philadelphians forced the legislature to exempt the city from its bill—but elsewhere in the state, cities and towns can't proceed on plans unless they offer the deal first to the phone companies, which can stall for years before deciding.

The fight isn't over. As people learn what's at stake, they are less likely to tolerate efforts that make it illegal for local officials to serve them. Tech companies like Dell are beginning to exert lobbying pressure on the other side. And Sens. John McCain and Frank Lautenberg responded to the Sessions bill by introducing the Community Broadband Act, which *stops* states from banning muni Wi-Fi. Those yearning for affordable broadband—or any at all—should let their representatives know which bill they prefer. And if you live in Colorado, Florida, Pennsylvania or any other state where legislators have roadblocked cheap wireless, you might check out whether

your local rep supported the telcos—or you.

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