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Consumer Federation of America

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Chairman Ted Stevens
Committee on Commerce, Science, and
Transportation
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Co-Chairman Daniel Inouye
Committee on Commerce, Science, and
Transportation
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Stevens and Co-Chair Inouye:

As the Commerce Committee begins consideration of critical telecommunications issues, Consumers Union, the non-profit publisher of *Consumer Reports*, and the Consumer Federation of America urges you to support and favorably report the bipartisan Community Broadband Act of 2005, which protects the right of communities to deploy broadband networks.

It is now more important than ever to ensure that consumers have competitive alternatives to high-speed Internet services. Together, telephone and cable operators control 98 percent of the broadband market. Where choice is available, consumers usually have at most two providers to choose from, restricting their options and driving up costs. The problem of limited broadband access is particularly acute in rural and urban areas that either lack access entirely, or have only a single, high-cost service to choose from—which is no choice at all. Dominant telephone and cable companies have all too frequently skipped over Main Street to deliver higher returns to Wall Street. Yet without broadband Internet access, Americans in rural and underserved urban areas will continue to be stranded on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Community-based broadband networks offer one of the last competitive alternatives to monopoly cable and telephone providers. They offer the promise of increased economic development and jobs, enhanced market competition, improved delivery of e-government services, and accelerated universal, affordable Internet access for all Americans. In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, new technologies demonstrated the resiliency and reliability of communications systems that can be used by police, fire, and EMS departments every day. In the future, these locally deployed technologies can help first responders, volunteers, and local governments react quickly to disasters, particularly when old ways of communicating no longer work.

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Today, communities across America are deploying, preparing to deploy or planning for new broadband services for their citizens, in many cases offering them broadband service for the first time. The Community Broadband Act, sponsored by Senators McCain and Lautenberg, would protect a local community's right to provide high-speed, or broadband, Internet access to its citizens. Affordable high-speed access to the Internet is not a luxury; it has become a public necessity. Communities that lack affordable high-speed Internet access will lose jobs as businesses that require it locate elsewhere. Moreover, their residents will continue to face increasingly serious disadvantages in educational and healthcare services. It is critical that the Community Broadband Act of 2005 be enacted to reinforce the right of all communities to offer their residents affordable high-speed Internet access.

Congress needs to take this common sense step to protect the rights of communities to offer vital services to their residents. Without it, dominant providers will continue to leave millions of Americans behind and the digital divide will only grow wider. The Community Broadband Act will ensure that the door to competitive, affordable broadband Internet access remains open to all communities.

We look forward to working with you toward enactment of this important legislation.

Respectfully,



Gene Kimmelman
Consumers Union
Vice-President, Federal and
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Mark Cooper, PhD.
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