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NCPIRG Statement on H1587

June 20, 2007. High speed Internet access today is much like highway access of yesterday. Governments built roads, bridges and highways to make it possible for goods and services to be delivered into our communities, as well as to help drivers find their way to jobs, shops and tourist locations. Today, ensuring that businesses and consumers have access to affordable, quality high speed Internet is vital to make our state economically competitive, especially in light of our faltering manufacturing sector.

School children use the Internet to complete homework; citizens use it to communicate with their elected officials on important issues; doctors use the Internet to diagnose and treat patients that may be miles away from the nearest medical professional.

Judging by the U.S.'s poor standing among other nations for access, affordability and speed of consumers' Internet connections, relying on cable and phone companies to offer these networks hasn't worked. That's why cities and towns in North Carolina such as Wilson, Salisbury, Wilmington, and many others are embracing municipal broadband and wireless networks in order to provide Internet access for citizens in areas where private providers refuse to serve or where they offer expensive, low-quality cable or DSL Internet service.

Municipal broadband is one way to help bridge the digital divide, as well as spur investments by commercial providers to provide faster, more reliable service. And in some rural locations, these publicly-owned or run networks may be the only option for consumers that are not served by cable or DSL at all.

Cable and phone companies have failed consumers. But rather than rise to the challenge and offer quality, affordable services, the industries are now attempting to block local governments from filling the need with broadband networks. Time Warner

and AT&T are pushing to require cities to finance their broadband service only with revenues from the broadband service, which will make it impossible to secure loans to jumpstart the project. Furthermore, cities will have to charge consumers phantom taxes, which will then be remitted to local government's general fund. Since when have we forced the government to tax itself?

The most troubling aspect of the policies being pushed by AT&T and Time Warner becomes clear in the context of another industry-backed bill from last year. In that legislation, the big Internet providers made sure that they didn't have to expand service into all areas of the state. Now they are trying to pass legislation that prevents local governments from providing service in the places they refuse to serve – it's like breaking up with your boyfriend or girlfriend and telling them they can't date anyone else.

The bottom line? We didn't leave it up to private, for-profit power companies to decide who got electricity and who got left in the dark. And we shouldn't leave it up to monopoly cable and phone companies to determine our communications future. Please oppose H1587.

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