



Ohioans Protecting Telephone Consumers

10 West Broad Street, Suite 1800 | Columbus, Ohio 43215-3485

Dec. 9, 2009

The Honorable Ted Strickland
Governor's Office
Riffe Center, 30th Floor
77 South High Street
Columbus, OH 43215-6108

Cc: Speaker of the House Armond Budish
Senate President Bill Harris
Chairman Timothy DeGeeter
Chairman Chris Widener
Representative Sayre
Senator Buehrer

Dear Governor Strickland:

Ohioans across the state deserve fair, competitive, and reasonable priced telephone service. We take this opportunity to express our concerns about, and opposition to Sub Senate Bill 162 and House Bill 276, legislation backed by the telephone industry that would have significant negative consequences for all Ohioans.

By making changes to the pricing and oversight of Ohio's local telephone companies, the legislation would harm consumers by **allowing rate increases, weakening consumer protections, reducing low-income customer benefits, lowering service quality standards and failing to expand broadband access.**

Our concerns about Sub Senate Bill 162 and House Bill 276 include:

- **Allowing rate increases.** This proposal will allow telephone companies to raise their rates to provide basic telephone service. In some areas of the state, there is no alternative to landline telephone service, and only one provider offers this service. Therefore, consumers with basic service may be faced with telephone rate increases of up to 20-40 percent in the next few years, with no alternative. Those most affected would include many low-income customers participating in the Lifeline program who are currently protected from such rate increases and senior citizens on fixed incomes.
- **Weakening consumer protections.** The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio's (PUCO) current Minimum Telephone Service Standards – a set of rules and consumer protections – would be eliminated and be replaced with weaker laws. Customers taking basic service only would have limited and weakened protections, while customers taking packaged service would have protections that are even less than what is afforded under the Consumers Sales Practices Act.

- **Reducing low-income consumer benefits.** The legislation would weaken the Lifeline discount program by severely reducing educational marketing efforts and would remove the shield against rate increases that currently exists for Lifeline participants. This likely means many eligible consumers will not be informed about the availability of Lifeline service, and that those who receive it will still be faced with higher telephone bills. In addition, non-Lifeline customers would be charged more to pay for a portion of the Lifeline discount.
- **Lowering service quality standards.** For example, the period of time telephone companies have to restore an out-of-service telephone line would increase from 24 hours to 72 hours. With removal of a provision that requires automatic customer credits for failing to meet the service restoration requirements, customers could potentially be out of service for even longer periods. This means that senior citizens, disabled or ill people and others would not have access to necessary telephone service including 911. This could put consumers dependent on their landline phone at risk and lead to a deterioration in service quality. Additionally, phone companies may cut jobs because of the decreased need for a phone line repair workforce.
- **Failing to provide broadband access to all Ohioans.** No commitment exists in the legislation for telephone companies to invest in broadband services for rural Ohio in return for relaxed regulations. Expanding consumers' access to broadband is important for economic development and job creation. It would provide consumers with all the opportunities that accompany broadband availability, including the ability to receive telephone and internet service over a high-speed connection, thus increasing consumer choices, providing the possibility of competition in places where currently none exists. Eight other states have included some type of broadband or investment commitment as a condition for deregulation.

We hope we can count on your leadership to protect residential consumers who need reliable and affordable telephone service. We urge you to reject Sub Senate Bill 162 and House Bill 276, and would like to request a meeting with you to discuss these important issues.

Sincerely,

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