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**Editorials**

**Television providers**

**More choice could benefit viewers**

Competition on airline routes led to huge reductions in the price of travel. More competition could have a similar effect on the price of cable TV service, which has been rising the last few years.

A half-century ago, most American homes had only one TV. Now TVs are everywhere, and the programming is migrating from TV sets to other devices. Some people are watching shows on cellular phones, iPods or home computers.

In such a world, the cable TV business seems a cozy artifact of the past. Although competition is increasingly prevalent today, many people still live in neighborhoods with only one cable provider.

Now the phone company — AT&T, formerly known as SBC — wants to shake things up by offering TV over its growing broadband network.

Cable companies don't like this idea any more than the big airlines liked deregulation in 1978. But competition on airline routes led to huge reductions in the price of travel. More competition could have a similar effect on the price of cable TV service, which has been rising the last few years.

Bills under consideration in the Missouri and Kansas legislatures would shift the authority to grant service franchises from cities to state government.

This would eliminate the need for providers to negotiate hundreds of franchises on a city-by-city basis, a change that would reduce barriers to entry and quickly move more choices to the marketplace. Lawmakers should look favorably on these proposals.

Cable companies say eliminating city-government franchising would give an unfair advantage to the phone company. Under typical franchise agreements, cable operators must construct networks that serve entire municipalities, or all areas above certain densities.

Cable companies say that under the proposed changes, their competitors could decide to serve only affluent neighborhoods.

This seems unlikely. Once the phone company begins marketing video, its service areas are likely to expand. With more competition, the regular price increases common in cable should moderate or even reverse. That could put the new services within reach of more people, expanding the market.

It seems odd to argue that in a fiercely competitive environment, some video providers would seek to serve only a select few.

The new rules would also apply to any cable company intending to enter new markets beyond its current franchise areas. As existing franchise agreements expire, the new rules would apply.

Consumers already have choices on who provides their TV service. Many households choose satellite video. Most people can still get free broadcast TV. Internet TV is just over the horizon. And when wireless technology becomes widely available, many people may be able to subscribe to new services whether their area is wired for cable or not.

Regardless of what Kansas and Missouri lawmakers do this year, the traditional pricing models of cable TV are under attack.

Cable companies say the proposed legislation makes little or no provision for emergency broadcasting systems, public access channels, control of public rights of way and similar requirements found in local franchise agreements.

Surely, such matters can be worked out in the legislative process. Public policy should focus on what's best for consumers.

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