

POINTS OF VIEW

Telecommunications: Open up to free market

How much do you pay for telephone service? For cable TV? For your cell phone? For modem connections for your computer?

If your household is anything like mine, these bills add up to a big piece of change each month.

Michigan law has a lot to do with the cost and quality of telecommunications services. The current law, which governs all phone companies in the state, was passed in 1995 and expires at the end of the year. A big fight is already under way in Lansing about how best to write the new law.

Everybody says they want the same thing: better consumer protection, better service, more competition, more innovation, reasonable rates. The argument is how best to do it.

Rep. Marc Shulman, R-West Bloomfield, proposes to restore some authority to the state Public Service Commission to regulate telephones and other telecommunications services. His House Bill 4904 would give the PSC the power to hear complaints from competing local service

providers when they believe "incumbent companies" — meaning Ameritech and GTE — have engaged in anti-competitive practices.

Shulman argues that the net effect of the 1995 telecommunications law was to usher in an essentially unregulated monopoly to the big phone companies. He says the law allowed existing phone companies to keep competitors out while charging customers high prices disguised by confusing bills.

There is little doubt there's virtually no competition in Michigan for local phone service. And, despite detailed denials from Ameritech, most evidence suggests phone rates here are relatively high.

The Michigan Alliance for Competitive Telecommunications (an alliance of phone companies trying to gain entry into the Michigan market) says the cost for base phone service in Michigan is \$10.77 per month, higher than any other Great Lakes state. By another estimate, phone users here pay overall \$250 million more per year than they would in a freely com-



PHILIP POWER

petitive market. A Small Business Alliance of Michigan survey of members found that high phone rates are the biggest obstacle to business growth in Michigan.

State Sen. Mat Dunaskis, R-Lake Orion, takes the opposite approach. His Senate Bill 1193 simply repeals the 1995 telecommunications act, so as to provide the Legislature with a "new starting point" before determining what regulations are in fact needed. While Ameritech spokesman Mike Barnhart says this approach amounts to a "zero-based approach to regulation," critics charge that repealing the 1995 act would simply let Ameritech continue to dominate the market.

Certainly, allowing the 1995 act to lapse at the end of the year without a successor would leave the big phone companies with an unregulated monopoly. Rep. Shulman says hearings will have to start within two weeks in order to get legislation moved by the time the Legislature quits for the summer.

Shulman is also trying to start an "Internet Caucus" in the legislature. In a notice faxed around to members of the House and Senate, he pointed out, "Michigan has always been in the forefront of technology. However, to remain there, it is essential for us to understand the innovations in the changing of the technological landscape."

Shulman's dead right. If Michigan is to stay anywhere near the forefront of the Information Revolution, members of the Legislature must inform themselves about what's going on in this very rapidly changing world. More than that, they need to be prepared to act as a bipartisan group to enact sensible legislation.

In this case, a good starting point

might be for Rep. Shulman and his Internet Caucus to read the report of the Michigan Information Technology Commission, issued a couple of years ago. I served on that group, which concluded that Michigan had a big future in information technology, but that much needs to be done to bring our telecommunications infrastructure up to snuff.

The Legislature needs to frame the debate in terms of how best to achieve an ultra-fast, reliable, state-of-the-art telecommunications environment rather than engage in ideological arguments about regulatory philosophy. Once this is done, it should not be difficult, even for the Legislature, to realize that the best way to do this is by opening the Michigan market to competition rather than hobbling along with unregulated monopolies.

Phil Power is chairman of Home-Town Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@homecom.net

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Frightening thought

When is the tide going to turn? When are we all going to begin to take responsibility for our actions and teach that responsibility to our children?

This morning a woman driving a substantial family-style Chrysler mini-van ran down our mailbox, sustaining damage to her vehicle. She stopped her van, surveyed her dented fender and drove on. She did not attempt to make contact with either of the homes whose mailboxes she had knocked to the ground. She did not leave her name and phone number in one of the boxes. She just went on with her life.

A little over 24 hours ago on a street in Detroit a woman returning home from a wake was run down just like our mailbox. No one stopped. No one took responsibility. Whoever

killed this woman just went on with his or her life.

If we do not learn to take responsibility for mailboxes, how are we going to learn to take responsibility for the lives of those around us? Where does it start?

Or, a more frightening thought, where does it end?

Carol Brichford
Farmington Hills

Impossible to digest

Find it highly inventive on Ms. Kambouris' part, to talk of her belief of "personal responsibility and accountability" on one hand, and then declare additional government intervention ("laws") is the remedy to juvenile gun violence.

Consider of the more than 6,000

violations of the "Gun-Free School Zones Act" (federal law), under 10 prosecutions have resulted of the much publicized violations of the "Brady" and "Instant Check" acts. Perhaps Ms. Kambouris could ask the honorable Carl Levin why so few prosecutions result when felons try to purchase firearms?

Then Ms. Kambouris declares that limiting my right to obtain a firearm (at my discretion), is not infringing by purchase limits. This is hard to swallow and impossible to digest.

I do find much common ground when she speaks of "No-Nonsense" enforcement of the law. Within New York City and Richmond, Va., enforcement of existing law has caused major reductions in violent and gun-related crime.

While participating at this march, perhaps these questions and topics will be discussed. This could also

become part of the "American Beauty" that we all love and respect.

Kevin M. Scano
Farmington

What you know

This letter concerns the following "Guns, guns and ignorant people who are not reluctant to spew forth their ignorance."

A recent letter from a Farmington Hills resident stated that (regarding handgun locks) ... family members cannot quickly defend themselves from intruders. My opinion is that he speaks through years of watching John Wayne movies — a faker and charlatan — just like Mr. Heston. I was a 19-year-old combat paratrooper in World War II.

I own two handguns that once belonged to two young men who died

trying not to surrender these weapons. On Friday, July 14, 1967, I was a victim of an armed robbery in which the perpetrator put the gun to my head. This incident was a total surprise. My back was turned, three armed robbers invaded the saloon and at least 60 people witnessed this.

If I would have tried to participate in a gun duel several people could have been harmed. As it happened one customer was shot in the abdomen. He wanted to display his hubris. He paid the price.

The moral of the story is if you travel to Mackinac Island please feel free to discuss the manure. But unless one does actually experience violence, blood, guns, bullets and death please keep your anti-Clinton (Republican) rhetoric only to matters of which you have experience.

Richard F. Krandio
Farmington Hills

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