Support Community Internet and Municipal Broadband

February 22, 2004

To Whom It May Concern:

The signatories to this oppose any state or federal policies that would impose a blanket ban or significant impediment to any city, county or state entity from providing broadband services to their citizens. We call on all states considering such legislation to reject it as harmful to the interests of their citizens.

The President, the Congress, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) have all identified the availability of competitive, affordable high-speed internet broadband access for all Americans as a national priority. The President has set an aggressive goal of 2007 for universal access in the United States. Without the contributions of local governments, it is doubtful that we will achieve universal deployment at all, let alone in two years.

Broadband access has become increasingly essential to economic growth, healthcare, and education. What electric power and telephones were to the 20th Century, broadband access will be to the 21st. Towns that don't have affordable broadband lose jobs. Their children suffer a serious disadvantage in college or in the workforce, where fluency with computers and the internet is increasingly assumed as a matter of course. Rural towns without broadband cannot take advantage of new breakthroughs in tele-medicine or the economic opportunities created by telecommuting. Even in crowded urban areas, the availability of broadband can vary from one neighborhood to another, stranding one neighborhood on the wrong side of the “digital divide” while two, three or even four broadband providers serve their neighbors.

Municipalities have a valuable role to play in filling this gap. Municipalities have a long history of providing necessary services for citizens and stimulating local businesses. In the 20th century, municipalities built power plants and telephone lines when private services did not move fast enough. Our competitive power and telecom industries today demonstrate that these services by municipalities complement private industry rather than compete with it. In addition, municipalities have a long history of spending money to benefit their citizens and encourage business development. Municipalities across the country have invested public money in convention centers, health clinics, and community colleges not to make money, but to bring business opportunities, healthcare, and education to their citizens. They should have the same opportunity to offer public hotspots and broadband access.

Opponents of municipal broadband have raised the strawman argument of governments monopolizing broadband or discriminating against competing private networks. Every signatory to this letter agrees that federal, state and local policies should encourage deployment of broadband networks in a competitive and technologically neutral manner. The reality has been
that local governments only spend money to build systems when they believe a need exists, and that these local systems encourage private companies to deploy and invest in competitive systems.

In conclusion, the question of municipal broadband is one that affects us all as a nation. In the last five years, the United States has fallen from an international leader in broadband to 13th among industrialized nations. Many of the countries that are now ahead of us - Canada, Japan, and Korea - have used municipal systems as one important element in their broadband strategy. As a nation, we cannot afford to cut off any successful strategy if we want to remain internationally competitive; nor should any state stand in the way of local governments serving the needs of local citizens.

**Signatories as of February 18, 2005**

Akaku: Maui Community TV

Alaska PIRG

Alliance for Community Media

Arizona PIRG

Austin Wireless City Project

Baller Herbst Law Group

California PIRG

CCTV Center for Media & Democracy

Center for Creative Voices in Media

Center for Digital Democracy

Center for Neighborhood Technology

Champaign-Urbana Community Wireless Network (CUWiN)

Chicago Access Network Television

Chicago Consumer Coalition

City of Geneva, Illinois

Common Cause

Consumer Action

Consumer Federation of America

Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety

Dandin Group

Detroit Wireless Project

EDUCAUSE

EFF-Austin

F2C: Freedom to Connect

Fiber For Our Future

Florida Municipal Electric Association

Florida PIRG

Free Press

Georgia PIRG

Illinois Community Technology Consortium

Illinois Citizens Utility Board

Illinois Municipal Utilities Association

Iowa Association of Municipal Utilities

Lafayette Pro Fiber

Mass PIRG

Massachusetts Consumers' Coalition

Media Access Project

Media Alliance

MediaChannel.org

Mountain Area Information Network

Muniwireless.com

New America Foundation

North Carolina Consumers Council, Inc.

NYCwireless

Office of Communication of United Church of Christ

PA-Fiber

Penn PIRG

PIRG in Michigan

Prometheus Radio Project

Public News Service

Reclaim the Media

The Association For Community Networking

The Borough of Kutztown

US PIRG

Vermont PIRG

Virginia Citizens Consumers Council