

The Assault on Municipal Broadband

AN ISSUE BRIEF

All Americans need access to affordable high-speed broadband.

The Internet plays a significant role in our lives. It allows us to stay connected with friends and family, search for employment, manage our banking and health care and advance our children's education. But while millions of us depend on this technology, many U.S. residents must use dial-up to connect, preventing them from accessing all of the Internet's benefits. Worse still, there is a digital divide: Many Americans cannot afford any kind of Internet access.

It's time to bridge the digital divide.

Millions of people live in parts of rural America that lack affordable high-speed Internet access. Internet service providers (ISPs) like AT&T, Comcast, Time Warner Cable and Verizon have largely confined their broadband deployment to urban and suburban regions. Some communities that these companies fail to serve have opted to create their own broadband networks.

But several state legislatures, acting at the behest of cable and phone companies, have passed laws that limit or outright ban municipal broadband networks. This practice must be stopped.

The decision about whether to build a local broadband network is best made by the community that plans to build it — not the major industry players that stand to benefit from reduced competition.

Public investment in broadband spurs innovation, investment and job growth.

Broadband service is a necessity, not a luxury, for businesses, schools and residents. Municipally owned and operated networks can provide this key infrastructure — either in place of corporate ISPs or in competition with such providers. Municipal broadband networks can connect whole communities — making civic services modern and accessible, improving the technology available to educators and providing tools that support local economies. Broadband is a modern-day utility: an essential service that benefits the whole community and that in many cases can be delivered both by public and private providers that coexist and compete to improve service quality.

What can your member of Congress do?

At least 19 states across the country have already passed legislation that restricts municipal broadband. States including Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Texas have laws that create barriers to municipal broadband development.

These laws vary in scope, but some outright ban municipalities from building their own networks while others make it very challenging for cities and towns to do so. A federal law that prohibits these anti-competitive bans on municipal broadband is critical to ensuring that everyone has affordable high-speed Internet access.