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AT&T Cable Service Unfair, MP Officials Say

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Mt. Prospect residents currently have two options for cable service: Comcast and WOW.

A third cable provider, AT&T, wants to break into Mt. Prospect but can't, following allegations that the company violates state and federal laws regarding fair treatment when it comes to programming.

Representatives of the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus recently learned that Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan launched an investigation of AT&T's U-Verse product to determine whether its treatment of public, educational and government (PEG) access channels complies with Illinois' Cable and Video Competition Law of 2007.

Illinois law requires that PEG channels be delivered at equivalent signal quality and functionality to commercial channels. But AT&T, a multi-billion dollar telecommunications company and Illinois' first video provider franchised under state law, claims it isn't possible with its "U-Verse" system to provide equal treatment for PEG channels used by the public.

"The problem is it's not equal to quality or standards than other channels," said Assistant Village Manager David Strahl.

An independent engineering study recently released by Illinois NATOA (National Association of Telecommunication Officers and Advisors) shows the technology is readily available to allow delivery of PEG channels on AT&T's U-Verse platform without the deficiencies of AT&T's current system.

The U-Verse system removes local PEG channels from its standard lineup, dumping dozens of channels into a generic "Channel 99"---stripping away individual channel identities and depriving those channels of basic functions viewers have come to expect.

AT&T subscribers can no longer tune to the familiar cable channel for village board meetings or homework help programs. Viewers can't switch between commercial and PEG channels, set a DVR to record a PEG program, receive closed captioning, or depend on getting timely local emergency alerts.

"If you watch Channel 5 and then click on Channel 99, you will get a listing of all the municipalities that have access channels, which could potentially consist of over 100," said Howard Kleinstein, cable production coordinator for the Village of Mt. Prospect. "You then have to find the channel or municipality you want then click on it and then within that category you have to pick what you want to watch. You then have to back out of Channel 99 to exit."

Kleinstein said the argument the village is taking is that if it's such a great deal to have that service why aren't all HBO channels or sports channels put on one channel.

"We were pleased to learn that the attorney general has initiated an investigation regarding AT&T's implementation of the Cable and Video Competition Law," said David Bennett, executive director of Metropolitan Mayors Caucus. "We have offered to assist her office in whatever way they deem appropriate."

The Attorney General's Public Utilities Bureau is conducting the investigation.