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## Suburbanites upset by AT&T's U-verse

By Anna Marie Kukec | Daily Herald Columnist

Some area suburbs are so upset with AT&T Inc.'s U-verse and its local access channel 99, that they've contacted state officials to see if violates state law.

Their complaints:

- U-verse takes too long to load local content;
- it has a lower image resolution compared to commercial channels;
- it doesn't offer broadcast-quality audio;
- it doesn't support closed captioning; and
- it cannot be digitally recorded with AT&T's built-in digital video recorder.

U-verse is Internet Protocol TV, a different technology than cable, that's "innovative" and "cutting edge," AT&T said. But try telling that to officials in Wheaton or Geneva or elsewhere.

"(This) puts the local programming into a different, sub-par, class of service," said Peter I. Collins, information technologies manager for Geneva. "The programming is basically streamed on demand like a Web cam, whereas the law has a requirement for equal quality and ease of use for programming."

AT&T backed legislation that was signed into law by the governor last year that opened the door for competition between telecoms and cable companies. It allowed AT&T to offer its U-verse to match Comcast Corp.'s cable TV.

Prior to the new law, AT&T struggled with town after town. Some wouldn't provide entrance to their rights-of-way to build the system. Others sought the same fees as the cable companies. But U-verse wasn't the same technology as cable and eventually AT&T filed lawsuits against some suburbs, including Geneva and Wheaton, seeking to gain access. Those lawsuits are still pending.

"Viewers will be forced to scroll through a menu of channels from the entire region in order to find the channel they are looking for," said Gary White, spokesman for Wheaton. "All channel identity is stripped away."

White also said AT&T's local channels will not be listed in an electronic program guide, although commercial channels will.

(Continue to next page)

AT&T sees its platform as an innovative way to deliver content that will benefit the community, said AT&T spokesman Andrew Ross.

"Consumers, for the first time, call the shots on the programming they want to see, not only from their own city, but from neighboring communities as well," Ross said.

Ross said Channel 99 provides all local content in one easy-to-remember location. Once Channel 99 is selected, customers could see a listing of all municipalities in their area. After selecting a municipality, a preview screen lists each channel available from that municipality or each channel can be viewed in full screen mode.

"Most viewers who have attended demonstrations agreed that the product met or exceeded their expectations," Ross said. "The truth is that this is an innovative system and the encoding format is optimized for a television screen. The result is a picture that we believe is as good or better than the cable product." Ross admits that due to the Internet-based system, there is a load time similar to On-Demand channels on cable.

"As with all of its products and services, AT&T is continually looking to make improvements and upgrades where possible and that is already occurring," Ross said. "AT&T has been working very closely with numerous communities and has shown great flexibility in making this process as streamlined as possible."

Still, local officials have been talking with the Illinois attorney general's office on whether U-verse follows the law.

"We have heard the concerns from some local officials and have been reviewing the situation," said Illinois attorney general spokeswoman Robyn Ziegler.

Andrew Ross said that AT&T is serious about meeting its obligation for providing the local access and "making this happen in accordance with the letter and the spirit of state law."

Competitor Comcast said its local access channels vary by community. There could be three types of access channels known as public, education and government, or PEG. PEGs are non-commercial.

"We work diligently to ensure that the picture quality is shown on the same high standard as the commercial channels," said Comcast spokeswoman Angelynne Amores. "It's just as easy for the viewer to get to a PEG channel as it is to get to HGTV or Discovery Channel."

Some communities do not want a PEG channel, probably because they believe that they cannot properly program them.