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Community Media Workshop

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Cable access concerns in D.C.

September 16th, 2008

CAN-TV's Barbara Popovic will testify before a House subcommittee in Washington D.C. tomorrow morning on threats to public programming under state cable franchises.

"Congress needs to recognize that a rapid erosion of benefits is underway," she said in a release.

Popovic will appear on behalf of the Alliance for Community Media, which has reported the loss of funding and facilities, as well as impaired signal quality and functionality in numerous communities under new state cable franchising regimes.

"In Illinois, AT&T is segregating [public, educational and governmental] channels on its U-Verse system, making those channels difficult to find and use," undercutting priorities set by Congress of localism and diversity in cable franchising and "ignor[ing] Illinois law requiring equivalent treatment of public channels," Popovic said.

AT&T has declined the subcommittee's request to send a representative, according to a release from the Keep Us Connected coalition. The National Cable Television Association is reportedly sending a representative.

Meanwhile the Illinois Chapter of the National Association of Telecommunication Officers and Advisers has released a study (pdf) conducted by an independent engineering firm that shows that "the only obstacle to AT&T treating PEG access in an equivalent manner to broadcast channels is its decision not to do so," said Julie Gray, telecommunications director for Glenview and president of Illinois NATOA.

"It's unacceptable for the first state franchisee in Illinois to disregard Illinois law on a matter so close to the community," commented Mayor Irvana K. Wilks of Mount Prospect. "Removing PEG channels from view deprives local residents of information that isn't available anywhere else. It's time for the excuses to end and equivalent treatment of public channels to begin."

The Municipal Mayors Caucus has asked the Illinois Attorney General to investigate AT&T's separate treatment of public access channels. The state's cable law calls for equal treatment for public access channels. (See last June's Newstip for more background.)