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Anyone doubting the power lobbyists still hold in Washington need only look at the ongoing, shameful net neutrality travesty.

It was bad enough that Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit Pai, a former Verizon lawyer, engineered the repeal of President Obama's landmark rules prohibiting

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Internet Service Providers from blocking or slowing down the internet or giving preference for certain online content. Now Republican Rep. Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee wants to lock the vast majority of Pai's rules into law through her proposed

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**BCAP offices will be closed Friday, December 29 and Monday, January 1**

legislation with the Orwellian title: the Open Internet Preservation Act. The Verizon, AT&T; and Comcast Dream Act would be more appropriate.

Unlike Pai's new rules, Blackburn's bill would prevent ISPs from blocking access to websites. That's good news. But Blackburn would put into law the FCC chairman's approval to allow ISPs to charge content providers on websites a premium for faster speeds. The legislation would devastate small businesses and startups from being able to compete, throttling creativity and innovation. It would also rake in billions for the ISPs who have poured more than \$600 million into their lobbying efforts over the last 20 years.

Blackburn has been one of their prime beneficiaries, receiving more than \$500,000 from telecom companies since she took office in 2002, including \$84,000 in the most recent election cycle, the biggest contribution to any member of the House of Representatives. Don't expect Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell or Republicans in the Senate to stand up for consumers in a heist that will net Verizon, AT&T; and Comcast billions. Telecom companies gave McConnell a cool \$250,000 in the last election cycle.

Blackburn also went out of her way to block any notion of blue states writing their own net neutrality laws. Her bill would pre-empt states from passing "any law, rule, regulation, duty, requirement, standard or other provision" related to net neutrality. The Tennessee Republican was well aware that in California only days after the FCC vote, state Sen. Scott Wiener of San Francisco announced that he would introduce a net neutrality bill when the Legislature reconvenes in January. Wiener later indicated that he would join forces with New York state Sen. Brad Hoylman of Manhattan to write legislation that would restore net neutrality to both states.

Democrats in Congress are hoping that a small number of Senate Republicans who in the past have expressed some support for net neutrality may find the courage to oppose Blackburn's bill if it reaches the Senate floor, as expected. It will take a major show of outrage by consumers and the tech industry to help make the case. They can start by citing a recent survey by the University of Maryland showing that 80 percent of Americans - including 75 percent of Republicans - oppose the notion of repealing net neutrality regulations. The only alternative is to hope the courts strike down Pai and Blackburn's efforts - or that enough Democrats win seats in 2018 to start their own cycle of congressional "repeal and replace." – ***San Jose (CA) Mercury-News editorial***

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PPL Electric Utilities this month received approval to spend about \$900 million during the next five years for repairs and improvements to its poles, lines and other equipment in its distribution network. A fee to pay for those improvements soon will hit customers' wallets. The Allentown-based company's "distribution system improvement charge," which can fluctuate every 90 days, was at zero during five of the last eight quarters **since PPL received its last distribution rate hike**, company spokesman Kurt Blumenau said.

He said this week the company filed with the Public Utility Commission to reset the rate to 0.91 percent, beginning Jan. 1. That will mean a hike of about 55 cents per month for a customer using 1,000 kilowatt-hours, he said, based on a typical monthly distribution bill of \$60.60. A PPL bill also includes generation and transmission charges. PPL is allowed to alter the system improvement charge to reflect work performed during the previous three months, Blumenau said. The rate can fluctuate from zero percent of the distribution costs borne by customers to a high of 5 percent.

The PUC voted 5-0 on Dec. 21 to approve PPL's improvement plans covering 2018 through 2022. PPL expects to spend about \$180 million per year to replace aging utility poles and underground lines and tackle other work related to its distribution network. PPL's new infrastructure plan drew criticism from several watchdog groups, including Three Mile Island Alert chairman Eric Epstein, who accused PPL of not being aggressive enough in maintaining its power grid. "[PPL is] arguing they need this money because of the age of their infrastructure," Epstein said. "I'm arguing if they have a prudent business plan, they would have been addressing these costs."

Said Blumenau: "The PUC has reviewed this and has determined our plan is cost-effective, and it will ensure safe and reliable service for customers." In a statement, PUC Vice Chairman Andrew G. Place noted PPL's new infrastructure plan increases spending by nearly 60 percent per year. Under its first five-year plan, PPL said it spent about \$137 million per year.

The distribution system charge is a mechanism allowed by the PUC since around 2012 enabling electric, natural gas and water or wastewater companies to seek money from customers beyond typical rate cases. It came from state law enacted about a year after a February 2011 natural gas explosion in Allentown that killed five people. Its passage was spurred in part by lawmakers who wanted to speed replacement of aging cast iron natural gas distribution lines like the one implicated in the Allentown blast.

PPL distributes electricity to approximately 1.4 million customers in 29 counties in eastern and central Pennsylvania. It is a subsidiary of PPL Corp., a group of seven regulated utilities that are also in Kentucky and the United Kingdom. The PUC has approved 25 utility infrastructure improvement projects worth \$2.3 billion from 2013 through 2016. Utilities statewide are scheduled to invest about \$8 billion in upgrades by 2023. – *Allentown Morning Call*

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A bipartisan effort to speed the development of advanced wireless networks nationwide is under way in the U.S. Senate. Draft legislation by Sens. John Thune, R-South Dakota, and Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, would require state and local government agencies to act on applications for multiple-company wireless applications within 60 days. The bill would also provide guidelines for fees that telecom companies would pay to access state and local sites for wireless relays and would give cable operators a “presumed right” to public rights of way.

Frederick Hill, communications director for Thune, the chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, said the aim of the legislation was to benefit areas of the nation that don’t have access to cutting-edge information technologies. “The internet carries economic and educational opportunity as well as entertainment and community to users,” Hill said in an email to Watchdog.org. “But millions of Americans, mostly in rural areas, still lack access to high-speed service at home, depriving them of these benefits. The legislation being written is intended to promote and reduce costs of broadband deployment.”

Some of the details of the bill remain in play, he said. The legislation has yet to be introduced, and Thune’s committee is currently working on addressing concerns about the bill, according to Hill. A bipartisan approach is key to passing the bill, he said. Schatz, Thune’s Democratic co-sponsor, is the ranking member of the Senate’s Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, Innovation and the Internet.

The bill would prohibit local agencies from denying the wireless companies’ access to publicly owned poles, rights of way and other structures except in cases involving “safety, reliability or generally applicable rules as to design, concealment and engineering.” In addition, the General Accounting Office would be directed to review wireless access on tribal lands. Most broadband companies seem to favor the streamlining of rules to expand access to high-speed internet and broadband services across the nation. CTIA – the Wireless Association, a trade group representing the wireless telecom industry, sees the Thune-Schatz bill as a path to help the United States win a worldwide race to put in place what’s called 5G.

5G refers generally to the fifth generation of wireless technology, a rollout that will provide higher speeds and capacities than current cellular systems. Rather than being dependent on fiber optic lines that run directly to homes, 5G would have cell sites installed around neighborhoods, and customers would get wireless modems to access the system. “By modernizing how wireless networks are deployed, this draft bill would help enable the wireless industry to invest hundreds of billions of dollars to win the global race to 5G,” the CTIA senior vice president for government affairs, Kelly Cole, said in a prepared statement. “We look forward to its quick passage.”

Efforts to streamline the permitting process for wireless technologies, however, have run into opposition in recent months. California Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr. in October vetoed a state bill that paralleled the federal legislation. It would have created a uniform permitting process for small cell wireless equipment and would have required local governments to charge standardized rates to companies seeking to place such equipment on publicly owned property, including streetlights and traffic signals. “There is something of real value in having a process that results in extending this innovative technology rapidly and efficiently,” Brown said in his veto message. “Nevertheless, I believe that the interest which localities have in managing rights of way requires a more balanced solution than the one achieved in this bill.”

Brown didn’t mention potential health effects of electromagnetic radiation emanating from such wireless equipment, but California groups, including the California Brain Tumor Association, highlighted those concerns in a campaign opposing the legislation. “I have

serious concerns about the deployment of the infrastructure for 5G, and if this is federally pre-empted, it will be disastrous for the American people,” Ellen Marks, the association’s executive director, told Watchdog.org in an email. “5G requires wireless telecommunication facilities (WTFs) every two to eight homes, as it does not penetrate walls and needs this relay system. The infrastructure is unsightly, noisy, a fire danger, will harm property values and is detrimental to our health.”

Marks points to a 2015 study carried out by university researchers in India that concluded participants living near mobile phone base stations sustained higher genetic damage parameters compared to a control group. Another study published in “Nature Research” this month found that women exposed to high magnetic field radiation have nearly three times of risk of miscarriage than those with lower exposure. – [watchdog.org](http://watchdog.org)

