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Cable companies such as Comcast Corp. would be free to raise customer rates without local government approval under a U.S. regulator's proposal, people familiar with the matter said.

Cities, states and other localities would lose regulatory authority over basic programming packages under the plan from Federal Communications Commission Chairman Tom Wheeler, said two agency officials who requested anonymity because the proposal hasn't been made public. Broadcasters say the change may leave cable providers free to exile TV stations from the basic cable package.

The FCC said it wanted to ease a restriction adopted in 1993, before satellite broadcasters competed with cable and when many communities were served by only one pay-TV provider. Cable companies say the change eliminates needless red tape. Critics say protection is still needed.

The proposal is "contrary to the public interest," the FCC's Intergovernmental Advisory Committee said in a **March 16 statement**. "It's just going to make things worse for consumers, not better," said Gary Resnick, chairman of the advisory panel appointed by the agency chairman and made up of local, state and tribal officials.

The proposal would remove protections including those that cap the price of a basic channel tier and equipment, require uniform rates across a locality, and make pay-TV and premium offerings more widely available, Resnick's panel told the FCC. Broadcasters fear the change will let cable companies assign TV-station signals to pricier tiers, cutting the audience for local programming, said Dennis Wharton, spokesman for the National Association of Broadcasters trade group.

Cable companies currently need to win a declaration from the FCC to escape local regulation. When they ask, they almost always get it: The FCC said it has granted all but four of 224 requests since 2013, retracting regulatory power from 1,433 communities. Under the change proposed by Wheeler, the FCC would presume cable operators face competition and deserve to be freed of regulation. That would put localities, rather than cable operators, in the position of needing to persuade the FCC.

Wheeler's proposal needs to win three votes at the agency where he's part of the Democratic majority. Both agency Republicans have sounded deregulatory themes. "The commission seeks a common-sense update for today's video marketplace to reduce regulatory burdens on all cable operators -- large and small," said Neil Grace, an FCC spokesman.

The change recognizes "vibrant competitive realities," New York-area cable provider Cablevision Systems Corp. said in a **filing**. Cable companies once had 95 percent of the pay-TV market, and then satellite-TV providers grew to offer competition in "virtually every community," the National Cable & Telecommunications Association said in filings. Largest U.S. cable company Comcast is a member of the trade group.

The FCC's proposal "is entirely appropriate given the dramatic changes" with choices available from cable, satellite, telephone providers and the Internet, said Brian Dietz, a spokesman for the cable trade group. The FCC said it was complying with a congressional request to make it easier for small cable companies to show they face effective competition.

Extending the relief to large cable operators goes well beyond Congress's "limited directive," broadcasters including ABC owner the Walt Disney Co., CBS Corp., 21st Century Fox and affiliates of Comcast's NBC said in a **May 12 filing**. Last year about 17 percent of Comcast's subscriber base was subject to rate regulation by local government, the company told U.S. lawmakers inquiring about its since-abandoned purchase of Time Warner Cable Inc. – ***Bloomberg***

Less than a week after Minneapolis granted a second company the right to offer cable service in the city, a third provider has announced it wants to jump into the market.

US Internet, a Minnetonka-based Internet provider that's currently building a high-speed fiber optic

home in droves in a dreadful primary turnout	network across the city, said Wednesday it plans to seek a cable franchise with the city. In a news conference at City Hall, co-founder and CEO Joe Caldwell said his company has already built out its networks over a far larger area than the city required of CenturyLink, the company that received a new cable franchise last week.

CenturyLink's agreement calls for the company to provide its Prism TV service to at least 15 percent of households within two years. Caldwell said US Internet has nearly universal wireless coverage in Minneapolis, and will be able to provide its fiber network to 30 percent of the city by the end of summer, among other offerings. "We're well past the 15 percent mark," he said.

Caldwell said US Internet aims to help customers move past traditional cable and opt for streaming services. But he said the company is aware everyone isn't ready to make the jump -- and wants to help cover the transition with the kind of cable service customers currently get from companies like Comcast, formerly Minneapolis' sole provider. "There is gong to be a bridge between people using cable where they're at today, and getting things like Hulu, Netflix, Amazon Prime and things like that in the future," he said. "We will support both initiatives."

CenturyLink's interest in getting into the local cable market prompted arguments from Comcast, which said it was unfair to allow new competitors to bypass state requirements that franchise holders provide their services to the entire city. Comcast's non-exclusive franchise deal, which expires in 2021, requires it to provide cable service to all Minneapolis households. US Internet's announcement was attended by a handful of City Council members, including some who applauded the idea of additional competition moving into the city.

Council Member Andrew Johnson said last week's council vote to allow CenturyLink to move forward with a more limited build-out of its services opened the door for more competition. "It only enables more vendors to meet that threshold and makes it easier for others to enter the marketplace," he said. "Today, less than a week later, we're seeing that with this announcement. And who knows, maybe we'll have a fourth or fifth party interested as well in providing cable service to our residents." – ***Minneapolis Star Tribune***

Time Warner Cable Inc. is still the belle of the cable deal makers' ball.

Shares of the U.S. cable operator jumped nearly 5% Wednesday after the WSJ reported that another potential suitor — Altice SA — is taking a look at Time Warner Cable. Less than a month ago, Time Warner Cable's $45.2 billion merger with Comcast Corp. fell apart on the back of regulatory scrutiny. Since then, Charter Communications which had made an unsolicited offer for Time Warner Cable before it inked a deal with Comcast, was expected to come back to the table and have a second chance to build a cable empire.

Suddenly Charter's possible path to victory at Time Warner Cable looks more complicated. On Wednesday morning, Altice, a telecom company controlled by French billionaire Patrick Drahi, announced a deal that would give the company a controlling stake in U.S. cable company Suddenlink Communications, its first purchase in the U.S. The WSJ said it's also made "initial contact" with TWC about a deal.

Altice might not be the only new suitor to emerge for Time Warner Cable. Analysts at BTIG speculated in a report Wednesday morning that Time Warner Cable could generate interest, mostly likely from overseas buyers. The potential interested parties BTIG cited include Japanese telecommunications giant SoftBank Corp. German telecom giant Deutsche Telekom, and the French telecommunications operator Iliad.
Softbank already owns Sprint and saw a deal to combine it with rival T-Mobile US Inc.fall apart after push back from U.S. regulators.

BTIG said a deal for Time Warner Cable could give Softbank's founder Masayoshi Son " wired broadband prowess in the two largest US cities," which could put Sprint in a better position relative to its. peers and a unique entry point into US fixed line broadband, BTIG said. Deutsche Telekom already owns T-Mobile in the U.S. and has helped turnaround its struggling brand, BTIG said and then pondered what T-Mobile's eccentric CEO John Legere could do to Time Warner Cable's messaging. T-Mobile, like Sprint, would be better positioned in broadband with Time Warner Cable if it held those assets.

Iliad, which considered buying a stake in T-Mobile last year, would have challenges in securing Time Warner Cable, BTIG said. When Iliad made a bid for a majority stake in T-Mobile, which is significantly smaller in valuation than Time Warner Cable, analysts and investors questioned whether Iliad had the financial muscle to pull off the deal. Ultimately, Iliad pulled its bid. Unlike Softbank and Deutsche Telekom, Iliad has no U.S. presence.

Lance Vitanza, an analyst at CRT Capital Group LLC, said in an email that Charter remains the best buyer because the two companies' footprints are largely contiguous. "Charter had publicly forecast $750 million of cost-savings and other synergies; that could easily prove conservative, in our view. Given the rally in its own stock since losing out to Comcast, Charter could easily afford to pay as much as $200 per share and still announce a deal as accretive to free cash flow, we believe." On Wednesday, Time Warner Cable's shares traded at $166.11 per share, an all-time high for the cable operator. – ***Wall Street Journal***

Next year's presidential candidates have been slowly formalizing their not-so-secret campaign intentions, and that means the broad Republican field soon will be crowding on stage for primary debates. With a field of what could be 16 or more presidential hopefuls, Fox News is putting some parameters in place to make the participant list for the first debate a little less unwieldy.

According to a *Washington Post* report, Fox will require participants in the Aug. 6 event to have placed "in the top 10 in an average of the five most recent national polls in the run-up to the event." Where does former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum - the Republican runner-up of the last presidential campaign - currently rank? He may barely make the cut, **based on the Real Clear Politics average of national presidential polls**.

Santorum is 10th in that average, with his highest showing at 3 percentage points. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio currently lead the pack. Perhaps Santorum can boost his poll figures - and increase his odds of making the debate stage - next Wednesday, when he heads to Butler County, Pa., to announce his campaign intentions. – ***Allentown Morning Call***