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A local lawmaker has co-sponsored legislation aimed at keeping landline telecommunications affordable in rural areas such as Wayne County, where broadband service is often spotty or nonexistent. There also are a large number of senior citizens in such rural areas who rely on landlines rather than wireless technology, said state Rep. Sandra Major (Susquehanna/Wayne).

The Republican is a co-sponsor of House Bill 1417, a bipartisan effort that would extend the life of the Pennsylvania Universal Service Fund that supports landline service for rural customers. The fund would be extended to 2022 if the bill passes, Major said, noting that wireless service is often inaccessible in rural, mountainous areas such as Wayne and Susquehanna counties. The legislation would also help smaller, local communications companies that serve the area, such as the North-Eastern Pennsylvania Telephone company in Forest City, Major said.

The House Consumer Affairs Committee was scheduled to vote on the bill this week, but the vote was delayed after concerns were expressed by larger corporations such as Comcast and AT&T. It should come back to vote by next month.

The state Universal Service Fund was established in part to reduce access charges for telephone customers. The fund, initially set at \$32 million, is meant to encourage greater toll competition while enabling carriers to preserve the affordability of local service rates. Major is not the only supporter of the legislation. The Harrisburg-based Pennsylvania Telephone Association is a proponent of the bill.



“For a large class of people (such as) rural families and businesses, landline service is still the most affordable, reliable service available,” said Steven J. Samara, association president, in an email. The Universal Service Fund stems from “the old monopoly

days of phone service, which even now with competition in the industry requires rural carriers to maintain wired networks for all businesses and households in their territories,” Samara said. He added, the bill will help Pennsylvania from having “subpar telecommunications standards for rural families and businesses.” – *Wayne Independent (Honesdale)*

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It's no secret that many Republicans hate the Federal Communications Commission's net neutrality rules, which went into effect this June and regulate Internet providers like legacy telephone companies. Some now want to use Congress' power of the purse to roll those regulations back. If it works, Congress could forbid the FCC from using its budget to enforce net neutrality and give Internet providers a come-from-behind victory.

This week, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved a bill that contains an amendment singling out the FCC and net neutrality. Notably, the rider would prohibit the FCC from using its most powerful regulatory tool to police Internet providers — Title II of the Communications Act. Companies such as Verizon and Comcast have argued that Title II is too heavy-handed, and could lead to the government directly setting the prices of Internet and phone service.

A similar funding bill in the House goes even further, blocking the FCC from enforcing *any* of the net neutrality regulations until an industry lawsuit to overturn the rules gets resolved. Oral arguments in that case are expected in December or January. ([This is the GOP's new tactic to stop net neutrality](#))

But would President Obama even sign a funding bill that has an anti-net neutrality rider attached? This is a tricky question that wraps in a lot of non-tech issues: If the bill gets to the Oval Office, Obama would have to choose between an issue that he has strongly supported and the continued functioning of the federal government. It's a tough call, and could go either way. But it probably won't even come to that, because Republicans appear split on these funding bill riders. Ultimately, this disagreement over strategy may be what foils the amendments.

While the lawmakers who do appropriations clearly want to defund net neutrality using their budgeting powers, leaders of the key committees that oversee the FCC, such as Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) and Rep. Fred Upton (R-Mich.), have been trying to come up with their own bill on net neutrality. Efforts to push the defunding language forward complicates Thune and Upton's own cause. A top Democrat who's been working with Thune, Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.), told the Hill Wednesday that their "real progress ... [could be] undermined if lawmakers try to fiddle with the FCC in a funding bill." If push comes to shove, expect these lawmakers to resist any attempt to legislate net neutrality through the funding process. — *Washington Post*

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The story of telecommunications is often one of two different worlds.

For most Americans, the broadband Internet is an everyday miracle. [Internet providers have invested \\$1.3 trillion](#) in the last two decades and continue to invest about \$70 billion each year to keep it that way. Despite occasional scare stories about supposedly faster speeds in some neighborhood in Latvia, average peak U.S. speeds, according to Akamai Technologies Inc.'s State of the Internet report, are now 50 megabits per second.

Our entry-level broadband options remain the most affordable in the 57-nation Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. American companies built the backbone through which most of the world's data travels and are the platform for services such as Facebook, Apple, Google, and Netflix that dominate the new, digital economy. But a handful of doomsayers see the glass as empty and, in an effort to remake the Internet as they think it should be, have urged the Federal Communications Commission to "reclassify" the Internet and apply the stringent rules used for yesteryear's telephone system to your broadband.

On its surface, that's like defining a car as a horse-drawn cart with an engine. But worse, "reclassification" demands a U-turn on the decisions that led to today's remarkable Internet. In 1996, the Clinton administration -- including, yes, Vice President Al Gore -- realized that the "information superhighway" was about to be born and sought to create a

policy framework that would spur its growth. An intense battle of ideas resulted. In one camp were those who called for rigid government supervision of the nascent Internet by applying the Depression-era rules developed for the Ma Bell telephone monopoly. In the other camp were those -- including myself and most other members of the administration -- who recognized that the Internet was something different, and could become something spectacular, if we let companies compete to produce it.

In the bipartisan Telecommunications Act of 1996, the blueprint of the Internet era, our more humble view won the day. The new "Information Superhighway" would be free of old-school phone regulation so that competition would allow it to be widely and affordably deployed, but guaranteed consumer protection as it happened. And the result has been the incredible growth and innovation we enjoy today online.

Would we have been off regulating it? Europe largely went in that direction, and now regrets it. Europe now massively lags the United States in access and investment. Just 60 percent of European homes can access speeds of 25 megabits per second or more, compared to more than 85 percent in the United States. Rural American homes have four times the access to high speed broadband as their European counterparts (including the Latvians).

And that's largely because the United States has different technologies competing to provide service -- we have not only fiber, but we also are a global leader in cable and in 4G/LTE wireless -- while Europeans put their faith in the remnants of their old phone companies, extending their antiquated monopolies. In short, the Europeans decided what the Internet was supposed to look like, while we allowed users and providers to determine what it would look like. Is it any wonder we ended up better off?

None of this denies the importance of strong rules to ensure all consumers and innovators have full and equal access to the Internet. But "reclassifying" the Internet -- relabeling it "telephone" instead of "information services" -- is wholly unnecessary to get there. That decision is now being predictably **challenged in court**, and will be there for some time to come. But in the interim, we could lose a generation of investment and innovation. Instead, let's bring back humility to the telecommunications debate. Congress should pass legislation that preserves the necessary consumer protections but rolls back the FCC's reintroduction of telephone monopoly regulations.

To make this happen, the political right would have to abandon its instinctive opposition to reasonable government rules protecting the open Internet, and accept that extending it to all Americans isn't wasteful or unmerited. The political left would need to abandon its unspoken flirtation with the fantasy of imposing public ownership or control over the many competing technologies that make up the Internet. Those of us -- on both sides and in both camps -- who were there 20 years ago have a duty to remind today's policy-makers of how the Internet came to be. It is the product not just of R&D and investment, but of patience and humility on the part of the policy-makers of that era. Before both sides go political head-hunting about the Internet, they might consider that example. -- **Cleveland Plain Dealer** op-ed by Ev Ehrlich, under secretary of commerce in the Clinton administration



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