

[Back to regular view](#) • [Print this page](#)

Hit the pause button, CUB's got good news

(<http://www.dailysouthtown.com/business/444323,271BIZ5.article>)

June 27, 2007

By David Kolata Columnist

It's no surprise that customer-satisfaction surveys put the cable industry dead last, below such perennial punching bags as cell phone companies and HMOs. But before you fling your remote control out the window, take heart that Illinois legislators have just passed the nation's toughest cable consumer protections -- and that could mean money in your pocket.

Senate Bill 678, which awaits Gov. Rod Blagojevich's signature, would, for the first time in Illinois history, give compensation to victims of poor cable service, much like the telecommunications bill a few years back that pioneered credits for bad phone service.

Let's say the cable company misses a repair call. Under the law, that's a \$25 credit. (No more 12-hour waits! SB 678 mandates a four-hour appointment window. If on the day of the appointment, the company tells you it can't make it, then you get to name the time, even if it's after business hours.) Even bigger credits could be at stake if the company can't install service within seven days. The company also would have to pay up for failure to fix service interruptions or poor video/audio quality within 48 hours.

There's more: A \$50 credit for each month the cable company fails to scramble an X-rated channel that a family doesn't want and a \$150 credit if it sells your personal information to some unrelated marketing list against your wishes. SB 678 also would restrict cable contracts to a year and force companies to offer reasonably priced basic service without expensive add-ons. The cable companies would have to launch these consumer protections within about six months and then annually prove to state regulators that they're meeting the new law's standards.

That's not exactly the kind of service we've come to expect from our cable companies. Just as surprising is one of the bill's major cheerleaders: AT&T, which doesn't usually go out of its way to support customer credits. That's where Attorney General Lisa Madigan and the bill's chief sponsor, Rep. James Brosnahan (D-Oak Lawn), come in.

Originally, the bill was nothing more than AT&T's push to get a foothold in the cable market -- so the nation's phone, Internet and cell phone giant also could become a TV giant in the bitter battle brewing with companies such as Comcast that have been eating away at Ma Bell's business. The golden apple AT&T reached for was a provision that allowed it to get a statewide franchise agreement to offer cable TV service instead of going hat in hand to each municipality for the right to offer service.

But after consumer advocates cried foul, AT&T came to the table, and an imperfect bill was transformed into something Illinois could brag about. Of course, there are some who still argue that this bill won't foster healthy, price-lowering competition -- but just allow a big AT&T to get even bigger and richer.

CUB certainly hopes that the measure does create real competition. But even if it doesn't, the power of SB 678 isn't only in the promise of competition but in its pro-consumer planks. So hats off to Attorney General Madigan and Rep. Brosnahan. They saw a golden opportunity for a big corporation to agree to the toughest consumer protections in the country -- and assuming Gov. Blagojevich signs the bill, as expected, all cable customers will benefit. As a consumer advocate in Springfield, that's the kind of happy ending I'd like to rewind again and again and again.

Citizens Utility Board Executive Director David Kolata writes a consumer news column the last Wednesday of each month. To reach CUB, call (800) 669-5556 or e-mail info@citizensutilityboard.org.