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Bill updating Illinois telecom laws on way to Quinn

State approves revised version of the Illinois Telecommunications Act that is designed to bring regulations up to date with broadband and mobile phone technology.

May 06, 2010 | By Wailin Wong and Monique Garcia, Tribune reporters

State legislators approved Thursday a revised version of the Illinois Telecommunications Act designed to bring regulations up to date with broadband and mobile phone technology.

The Senate passed the bill with a 59-0 vote after garnering unanimous approval in a Wednesday vote in the House. The legislation now goes to the governor's desk.

"We look forward to Gov. (Pat) Quinn acting quickly to sign Senate Bill 107 into law so businesses and consumers across Illinois can benefit from new investment and jobs, increased broadband access and additional choices in new technologies," the Illinois Technology Partnership, a business group, said in a statement.

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The revamped bill frees up legacy landline providers, such as AT&T, from certain regulations that the industry had deemed overly restrictive and outdated in light of technological trends. AT&T said the old framework obligated the company to invest in fading landline services instead of wireless and broadband technology. Supporters also said the overhauled legislation would spur additional investment in new technology from other companies, increasing the amount of competition among service providers.

The old law dates to 1985 and was last updated in 2001. It was scheduled to expire at the end of June.

Both Democrats and Republicans praised the plan as one that would create jobs while also protecting consumers.

"This reform allows competition and choice to drive the marketplace for telecommunications," said sponsoring Sen. Michael Bond, D-Grayslake. "Companies will be able to invest in the infrastructure and technology that best create value in the market place."

As a nod to consumer advocacy groups that voiced concerns about protecting landline customers, the bill freezes three "Consumer's Choice" rate packages for AT&T subscribers. These basic plans cost less than \$20 a month and would have been killed within a few years. In addition, the new telecom bill lowers the price of the Consumer's Choice Extra plan, which covers unlimited local calls, by \$1.

These moves did not fully placate critics. The Citizens Utility Board considered preservation of the Consumer's Choice plans a victory, but warned of a potential deterioration in service and higher rates. CUB also said the proposal allows AT&T to get out of an Illinois Commerce Commission order that requires the company to provide broadband services to 90 percent of homes outside the Chicago metropolitan area.

Without this protection, residents in those areas will have to "trust AT&T will bring investment there," said Bryan McDaniel, policy analyst at CUB. "The ICC had guaranteed it was going to be brought there. ... AT&T doesn't have an incentive to worry about the public as much as they worry about their shareholders."

But Paul La Schiazza, president of AT&T Illinois, said he expects the legislation will offer incentive for "more providers to deploy different technologies in the less dense parts of the state."

La Schiazza added that reporting requirements to the ICC are built into the proposal, which legislators are scheduled to revisit in three years. At that time, they can determine whether the new law actually resulted in more jobs, greater investment and increased competition among technology providers.

"It will be an open book with the Legislature in terms of what happened in three years," La Schiazza said.



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