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Press Release

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A New Maine Coalition Takes on Cable TV

A coalition of consumer-interest groups and community media advocates will support new state legislation to hold the powerful cable industry accountable.

Portland, Maine - The Community Television Association of Maine (CTAM), an Affiliate of Maine Municipal Association, is working with a coalition of consumer-interest groups, cities and towns across the state to hold the cable industry accountable. The major points of the legislation will address a number of State Statute non-compliance issues and ongoing industry practices that harm consumers and are discriminatory against PEG (Public, Educational, Government) channels that serve hundreds of Maine communities.

The legislation titled “**An Act To Ensure Non-Discriminatory Treatment of Public, Educational and Governmental Access Channels by the Cable Operator**” is based on similar successful legislation and rulings in California, Illinois and other States. It asks the State to toughen regulatory control of the cable telecommunication systems operating on the public right-of-way for commercial enterprise. The coalition is motivated to act after years discriminatory business practices used by the cable industry to marginalize these important local channels.

The industry has repeatedly provided inferior technical support, most recently denying access to High Definition (HD) channel space on their systems, and pushing the PEG channels into the highest tier of their systems, a practice commonly referred to as “channel slamming”. This practice makes it very difficult for viewers to find their municipal meetings and other community events that are typical of PEG programming.

Tony Vigue, former President of CTAM and a long-time PEG access advocate writes, “These local channels provide valuable information to their communities and have been part of cable television’s program selections for over 30 years here in Maine. There are currently more than 70 of these channels operating across the state, providing free public access to the media and open government options for hundreds of towns that wish to televise their municipal and school board meetings.

Now these channels are systematically being pushed into the highest tiers of these expanding systems. It is important to note that no local commercial channels on these systems are being moved. The reason for “channel slamming” our local PEG channels is purely monetary since the single digit channel numbers command premium lease rates from shopping networks and the cable operator presently receives no income from the local PEG stations that currently occupy these channels.”

“We have to ask ourselves”, Vigue says, “would we rather have more shopping channels or continued easy access to local community events and information from our municipal and school board leaders? The answer is obvious.”

The coalition also asks that the State of Maine strengthen the “density requirements” of new cable franchises in the state to include a formula of 15 homes per mile, thus providing increased cable and broadband coverage in rural areas.

As Federal regulatory oversight increasingly diminishes due to intense lobbying by the industry, this bill protects municipal interests and provides for increased consumer protections and quicker responses from the cable operator to ensure timely franchise renewals.

The legislation will be sponsored by Senator David Woodsome (R) York and others who are confident of bipartisan support in the legislature.

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