

Obama pitching more access to fast Internet

January 14 2015, by Jim Kuhnhen



President Barack Obama speaks at the National Cybersecurity and Communications Integration Center in Arlington, Va., Tuesday, Jan. 13, 2015. Obama renewed his call for Congress to pass cybersecurity legislation, including a proposal that encourages companies to share threat information with the government and protects them from potential lawsuits if they do. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

President Barack Obama is once again challenging major cable and telephone companies by encouraging the Federal Communications Commission to pre-empt state laws that stifle competition for high-speed

Internet service.

Obama wants to expand access to broadband communications services, siding with local communities that want either to expand competition or provide municipal services themselves. To promote it, he is announcing that his administration will provide technical and financial assistance to towns and cities that want to improve Internet service for their residents.

The modest proposals do not require congressional approval and are part of a series of measures Obama is rolling out before his State of the Union address next week.

Obama will detail his broadband plans Wednesday in Cedar Falls, Iowa, a community that has taken steps to provide high-speed Internet to its residents.

The administration's stance would put it at odds with major cable and telephone companies such as AT&T, Comcast and Time Warner Cable Inc., that currently provide Internet service, often with little or no competition. Obama has already angered the industry by calling for new FCC rules that treat Internet service providers as public utilities.

In a White House video before the announcement, Obama says: "You know what it feels like when you don't have a good Internet connection. Everything is buffering, you try to download a video and you've got that little circle thing that goes round and round, it's really aggravating."

"There are real world consequences to this and it makes us less economically competitive," he says.

Jeff Zients, director of Obama's National Economic Council, said Obama wants to use the bully pulpit of the presidency to press the FCC, an independent regulatory agency, to "ensure that all states have a

playing field that allows for a vibrant and competitive market for communication services."

Nineteen states place restrictions on municipal broadband networks, many with laws encouraged by cable and telephone companies. Advocates of those laws say they are designed to protect taxpayers from municipal projects that are expensive, can fail or may be unnecessary.

The National Governors Association and the National Conference of State Legislatures have urged the FCC not to pre-empt state laws on broadband. And Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., said the proposal amounts to the federal government attempting to wield greater power and control.

"This afternoon, we will see the president parachute into Iowa and tout a new federal takeover of state laws governing broadband and the Internet," Fischer said. "These Washington-centric solutions set a dangerous precedent and have real impacts on local communities and businesses."

The FCC is already considering requests for Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Wilson, North Carolina, to prevent state laws from blocking the expansion of their broadband projects. FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler said in June that local communities that want to provide their own broadband service "shouldn't be stopped by state laws promoted by cable and telephone companies that don't want that competition."

A new White House report says that while 94 percent of Americans living in urban areas can purchase an Internet connection of 25 megabits per second, only 51 percent of Americans in rural areas have access to such Internet speeds.

The report also says that because of lack of competition three out of four Americans lack a choice for such Internet service.

The White House also announced that the Commerce Department would promote greater broadband access by hosting regional workshops and offering technical assistance to communities. The Department of Agriculture also will provide grants and loans of \$40 million to \$50 million to assist rural areas.

A council comprising more than a dozen government agencies will also seek to remove regulatory and policy barriers that hinder broadband competition, the White House said.

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