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Cable choices Competition helps consumers

If you were in the market for a washing machine, you'd compare prices, models and manufacturers offered by different retailers, then make your purchase depending on what best suits your needs.

Choice and competition are building blocks of the free market. Certainly the cell-phone market offers an explosion of choices and amenities - and competitive prices to keep consumers happy hunters, indeed.

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But choice comes to a screeching halt when you're talking about Florida's cable television industry. In the vast majority of cases, it operates on a monopoly-based franchise system that limits consumers to doing business

with whichever company has the local contract with local government.

Competitors need not apply.

If you're unhappy with your cable service or its programming, you can complain to the company or the local government that grants its franchise. You can complain to your neighbors or even the newspaper. But since normal market pressures are nonexistent, the company doesn't have to worry that you'll take your business elsewhere. Unless you choose satellite TV, there's nowhere else to go.

That this is bad for consumers, Florida lawmakers generally agree. But members of the House and Senate this session have been far apart on how best to promote competition in the cable television industry. And with just a day left in the regular session, it appears unlikely that a bill will emerge this year.

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Even if nothing comes together in 2006, it's a hopeful sign that there appears to be consensus among legislators that the current system should be changed.

"There is no freedom to choose cable, like they choose everything else. But less than 2 percent of Floridians have competitive cable," said Rep. Trey Traviesa, R-Brandon, who sponsored HB 1199. "This is what a monopoly looks like: It gets customer service wrong, and it's late to make improvements."

Mr. Traviesa's bill differs significantly from the Senate measure (SB 900) in regulatory mechanics.




It would let companies that offer cable service obtain franchise certificates from the state. Currently they receive their franchise agreements from city and county governments, but critics such as Mr. Traviesa say existing law is overly restrictive and stifles competition. He cites a Phoenix Center for Advanced Legal and Economic Policy Studies estimate that Florida's cable consumers could save about \$600 million a year if competition existed.

The House bill had the support of telephone companies, which are trying to enter the cable television market.

The Senate bill, which local governments support, requires that cities and counties establish uniform service criteria for all companies instead of mandating that they make separate deals with each firm. Unlike the House bill, the Senate plan would let local governments require that cable firms serve their entire franchise area and not exclude less profitable segments.

Should the current system remain intact this year, at least lawmakers have sent this strong signal: More competition is good, and eventually it's coming.

Originally published May 5, 2006

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