

Telecommunications

Overview

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) advocated for the continued provision of basic local (landline) telephone service for consumers, in 2014. Basic service is offered to consumers without any requirement that consumers buy a bundle of services.

Under a provision in House Bill 490, telephone companies would have been permitted to discontinue basic landline service.

Protecting the affordability and availability of basic landline service for Ohio consumers

OCC sought to protect Ohioans' basic telephone service in November by recommending that the legislation be significantly improved, or not enacted, in House Bill 490. The bill would have allowed telephone companies to discontinue Ohioans' basic landline service. Basic service includes a dial tone for a flat monthly rate, access to 9-1-1, operator services, telephone relay services for the hearing impaired, caller ID blocking on a per-call basis, directory assistance and long distance service, among other things.

Consumers' Counsel Bruce Weston testified on two occasions with concerns for Ohio consumers. Those concerns included that the amendment could allow telephone companies to leave consumers with less reliable service, no service, or higher-priced alternatives (i.e., service bundles, such as cable TV and Internet) that they may not want or need.

In parts of rural Ohio, for example, it is not uncommon to find a lack of cellphone signal. For rural Ohioans in those areas cellphone service, even if affordably priced,

would not be a viable alternative in the event telephone companies were to withdraw basic service.

Also, the bill would have allowed telephone companies to give a mere 90-day notice in advance of the changes to their service offerings. This amount of time was insufficient for customers to try to find another affordable option for telephone service for themselves and their families.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is in the midst of transitioning from a public switched telephone network to an Internet-based network. Although HB 490 was based on this upcoming policy change, OCC noted that it could potentially take years for the FCC to implement it. Thus, there is not a pressing need for the legislation now.

Governor Kasich informed the Senate Agriculture Committee that he would veto HB 490 if it included the telephone legislation. Ultimately, the Senate Committee halted its consideration of HB 490, and the legislation did not become law. (Note: In 2015, telephone legislation has been included in the biennium budget bill, House Bill 64.)