WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. Federal Communications Commission took a small step to address a growing debate on whether high-speed Internet providers like AT&T Inc. and Comcast Corp. should be barred from charging extra fees to guarantee access to the Internet.

The five commissioners backed a proposal on Thursday to start a "notice of inquiry" regarding broadband industry practices. The notice of inquiry, a fact-finding mission that does not always result in a rule being issued, grudgingly won support from the two Democrats on the Republican-controlled panel.

"I would have preferred a more proactive approach," said Democrat Jonathan Adelstein. Fellow Democrat Michael Copps chided the commission for proceeding too leisurely and said putting out a notice of inquiry is "not the way to sail boldly forward."

"I want an FCC that unconditionally states its preference for nondiscrimination on the Internet," Copps said.

The concept of broadband providers treating all Internet content in the same way is also known as "net neutrality" and has been the subject of much debate among lawmakers. The fear is that if broadband providers charge extra fees for more reliable service, that they would also be able to block access to the Internet -- a contention that broadband providers hotly dispute.

Republican Commissioner Robert McDowell called the initial proposal a sensible, thoughtful and reasonable step and said the commission should resist the temptation to impose regulation based merely on theory.

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The FCC also voted in favor of classifying wireless broadband as an information service, shielding it from numerous regulations.

Wireless broadband, which powers items like the data cards used in laptops to get a high-speed connection to do work on the road, will be less regulated than if it was classified as a telecommunications service.

An information service includes services like voice mail, that use technology to manipulate and store information, while telecommunications is the simple transmission of information.

Information services have always been lightly regulated by the FCC, whereas telecommunication services are subject to many regulations.