Draft Legislation Aims To Aid Competition In Broadband Services

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A key House committee released draft legislation yesterday requiring broadband providers to allow their subscribers to view any legal online content, a policy aimed at keeping big Internet companies from restricting access to competitors' Web offerings.

The House Energy and Commerce Committee draft is a victory for advocates of "net neutrality" -- the idea that Internet providers have to stand aside and allow customers to access any Web pages as long as the content is legal. The principle is considered crucial to preserving the open nature of the Internet and preventing big broadband providers from squeezing out smaller competitors that offer voice, video or other services.

Another provision in the proposed law also makes it easier for telephone companies to offer television over high-speed lines. It seeks to free cable and telephone companies from having to negotiate video franchises with numerous local authorities around the country, instead giving the Federal Communications Commission more authority over the process.

That would largely benefit the major telephone companies like Verizon Communications Inc., SBC Communications Corp. and BellSouth Corp., which hope to offer television over fiber-optic lines. Yesterday, officials at those companies reacted favorably to the legislation.

Other aspects of the draft legislation are aimed at making sure cable and telephone companies get equivalent regulatory treatment as they offer broadband Internet access.

The draft is a first salvo from the committee, which is led by Texas Republican Joe Barton, in what is likely to be a lengthy battle in Congress over any rewrite of the 1996 Telecommunications Act.