



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF WISCONSIN

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To: Assembly Committee on Energy and Utilities
Senate Committee on Commerce, Utilities and Rail

Re: Opposition to Assembly Bill 207 / Senate Bill 107

The League of Women Voters of Wisconsin is strongly opposed to AB 207 and SB 107 based on our support of citizens' right to know and local municipalities' right to govern.

The League understands that a viable democracy relies on an informed electorate. Only with in-depth information and open decision-making can citizens make wise choices. We advocate for open meetings, open airwaves and open discussion, regardless of the issue or technology involved.

Public, Education and Government (PEG) Access is committed to such openness. The League of Women Voters avails itself of PEG Access around Wisconsin and the nation, all for the purpose of providing the in-depth information about issues and governmental practices and policies so critical to a healthy democracy in our complex 21st century world. PEG Access is the only true "public" forum among current media options.

PEG Access should be provided sufficient funds from franchise and per-subscriber fees to purchase and maintain equipment, employ staff, and enhance training programs. In addition, PEG Access should remain free from distributors' up-streaming charges. Franchise and per-subscriber fees are a necessary means to a desired end – a healthy democracy in which all voices are heard. This legislation clearly would result in reduced funding for PEG Access.

Equally troubling about this bill is that it would remove local municipalities' authority to grant cable franchises to operators, instead requiring providers to obtain a video service franchise from the state Department of Financial Institutions (DFI). The bill would allow existing cable operators to opt out of their current local franchise agreements and become subject to the state franchise.

Yet this bill does not empower state government to act in the interests of the public. If DFI does not issue a franchise within 10 days of receiving a complete application, the franchise is deemed automatically approved. Franchises may be transferred to other parties without government approval. Neither the state nor the municipality is allowed to regulate rates.

Municipalities would continue to receive the same percentage of gross revenue from providers, but the definition of revenue to which this applies has significant exclusions, resulting in reduced local revenues. Although no funding for PEG channels is required, municipalities would be required to pay all costs of connecting PEG channels to a video service provider's network, costs that are currently paid by cable operators.

Under this bill, local municipalities are prohibited from charging fees for right of way access, although utility boxes take space and may result in lost parking revenues.

This bill takes control away from local governments and denies citizens access to needed public affairs programming. It is a bad bill, and we urge you to vote against it.