

October 13, 2007

We cannot afford to leave rural Washington behind

James Peters

Cell phones are quickly becoming the single most important device that Americans use. While urban residents often take for granted reliable wireless service, people living in rural areas of Washington suffer from spotty service and potentially dangerous dead zones where there is no signal at all.

People living in rural areas of Mason County, as well as those who travel on its remote, surrounding roads to get to work, still lack reliable cell service. This compromises public safety and inhibits economic development, and if the Federal Communications Commission has its way, this situation could get even worse.

In 1996, Congress passed the Telecommunications Act, which basically says that choices in telecommunications services and prices in rural areas should be comparable to those available in urban areas.

To achieve this goal, Congress established the Universal Service Fund which is supported by a line-item charge on all phone bills. These funds are used by all telephone providers who have obtained eligible telecommunications carrier status to construct, maintain and operate cell sites in Washington.

The Universal Service Fund has grown from about \$2 billion to about \$4 billion over the past few years, and some officials at the FCC and elsewhere believe that some action has to be taken to curb the growth of the fund. While this is a laudable goal, it is a fact that fund growth is a direct result of the explosive demand for wireless service in rural communities. Rather than take action that ensures that consumers can choose the wireless services that they so obviously want, the FCC is considering enforcing a cap on payments from the fund to rural wireless carriers at the 2006 level.

Wireless carriers estimate that the cap, if adopted by the FCC and allowed to become effective by Congress, would cost Washington \$8 million a year in funding for rural wireless infrastructure. Put simply, a cap means that 15 to 25 cell sites per year will not be built in rural Washington.

People living in rural areas deserve equal access to modern wireless technologies as those living in more densely populated towns and cities. High-quality wireless service creates new economic opportunities and increases productivity and connectivity for local businesses. In addition, ensuring the expansion of wireless networks in rural Washington narrows the technology gap between rural and urban areas.

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When it comes to public safety, a cap would significantly harm rural citizens. Better cell phone service would allow law enforcement officers to carry out their duties more effectively. Furthermore, poor wireless service can delay the reporting of emergencies which can literally mean the difference between life and death.

There are still many areas in the state, like much of the Olympic Peninsula, where it is nearly impossible to get a strong cell phone signal. The Peninsula's rugged terrain and sparse population make it impossible to fully serve without high-cost universal service support.

We cannot afford to cap the Universal Service Fund for wireless because we cannot afford to leave rural Washington behind.

James Peters is chairman of the Squaxin Island Tribe in Mason County.