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OPINION

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LETTERS, FAXES & E-MAIL

State losing out on funds for cell phone towers

For many of us, cell phones have become a necessary component of everyday life, helping us connect with businesses, keep in touch with friends and family and even call for help in emergencies. Unfortunately, many people in rural Illinois can't rely on cell phones to stay connected. Even today, in the 21st century, many areas in the Land of Lincoln still have little or no access to reliable cell phone networks.

That's not right. But instead of helping build the new cell towers these rural customers need, the Federal Communications Commission is considering putting a cap on the Universal Service Fund (USF), a tax-supported federal fund intended to subsidize expanded networks in rural areas.

Under the proposed cap on the federal fund, which takes in about \$7 billion in fees from phone users each year, cell phone networks in rural Wisconsin would receive almost \$50 million each year. Iowa networks would get about \$40 million a year for network improvements.

But networks in Illinois would receive less than \$2,000 in federal funds each year — about enough to build one new cell tower every 175 years, give or take a few. These incredibly lopsided funding levels reflect past foot-dragging by the Illinois Commerce Commission. Despite my urging, the ICC has not yet granted Illinois wireless providers the status they need to receive money from the federal fund. Because the proposed federal cap freezes each state's spending at current levels, the ICC's tardiness could keep Illinois from receiving tens of millions of dollars in federal investment.

In 2005, Illinois phone customers contributed more than \$267 million in taxes to the Universal Service Fund — and our state's wireless customers received almost nothing in return.

Everybody in Illinois — rural and urban residents alike — should have equal access to reliable cell phone coverage. As chair-

man of the Governor's Rural Affairs Council, I am calling on law enforcement agencies, public health advocates, farm bureaus and everyday people to let our elected representatives in Washington know we oppose this unfair cap on the USF.

To help Illinois get the federal funds we need to expand our rural wireless networks, please visit www.connectingruralamerica.org.

*Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn
Chairman
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