

NET NEUTRALITY ISSUE ATTRACTS TOP LOBBYISTS TO THE HILL  
BY DREW CLARK

Top officials from the technology and telecommunications industries were on Capitol Hill in force early this week to lobby the issue of network neutrality, a development that is likely to accelerate as the week progresses.

With a vote on H.R. 5252 scheduled for a House floor vote likely Friday, the issue centers on whether the House Rules Committee will allow an amendment designed to strengthen the bill's network neutrality rules. The bill would bar Bell and cable company companies from blocking competitors' traffic.

The committee has instructed members seeking to offer amendments to provide copies by Wednesday at 10 a.m. The rules panel has listed H.R. 5252 as the first item of business at its 3:30 p.m. Wednesday meeting.

House Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., and Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass., each have amendments that would ban Bell and cable companies from charging businesses to allow speedier Internet delivery to preferred customers.

"There has been some talk of trying to come up with a compromise amendment, but right now it is unclear whether Markey's people and Sensenbrenner's people will be able to come to an agreement," said Harold Feld, senior vice president of the Media Access Project. The lawmakers' offices did not return calls by press time.

Such strict neutrality rules are being sought by Internet companies like Google, public interest and advocacy groups, including MoveOn.org, and by House Democrats including Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of California. Bell and cable companies oppose neutrality rules. Republicans have been divided.

Google co-founder and President Sergey Brin pressed the neutrality issue in Tuesday visits with Sens. Barack Obama, D-Ill., John McCain, R-Ariz., and Gordon Smith, R-Ore. "I think people care about choice, and we are hoping that will win the argument," Brin said.

Officials with Verizon Communications expressed confidence Monday that H.R. 5252, sponsored by House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Joe Barton, R-Texas, would pass. If an amendment were allowed, officials said the anti-neutrality side still would prevail.

"MoveOn.org and all sorts of people are going to try a last-ditch effort to do whatever they think they can, but we think we are going to win," said Verizon spokesman David Fish. Verizon continues to urge Barton to offer a manager's amendment that would weaken one aspect of existing neutrality provisions in the bill, said Joanna McIntosh, a vice president at the Bell company. McIntosh said the provision includes "a huge, sweeping, unlimited authority for the FCC; it should scare all of us, but it is there."

Regarding the overall bill, which would allow Bell companies to more quickly enter the market for video services, McIntosh said, "video choice is a good issue for consumers, and therefore members of Congress." McIntosh said competition for video services would benefit consumers. She said prices in long-distance telephone service and wireless service have dropped 50 percent and 77 percent since 1995, respectively, while cable rates have increased 86 percent over the same time period.

"Competition is good; there just isn't enough of it in video," McIntosh said. She added that municipalities opposing the measure are overreacting to the changes that the bill would impose on the current franchising process.