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## Why FCC Head Aims to Broaden Access to Spare Cable Channels

By COREY BOLES

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WASHINGTON -- The chairman of the Federal Communications Commission is proposing a 75% cut in the rates cable television companies can charge to lease access to their spare channels, said FCC officials who have seen the plans.

By slashing the rates to 10 cents a month per subscriber from about 40 cents, FCC Chairman Kevin Martin appears to intend to enable more programming from women and minorities.



Kevin J. Martin

The underrepresentation of women and minorities in television has long been a concern of the FCC's Democratic commissioners. More recently, Mr. Martin has focused attention on that idea in public speeches.

To enact the fee change, Mr. Martin would need at least two other votes on the five-member commission, which includes two Democrats, two Republicans and the chairman. The item is likely to be voted on this month and could be enacted as soon as next year, depending on the extent of cable industry opposition.

Most cable companies are required to set aside 15% of their channels for lease to groups that couldn't otherwise compete with commercial broadcasters. Andrew Schwartzman, president of Media Access Project, a public-interest group that has pushed for lower rates for the cable-access channels, said only about 1% of the leased-access channels are being used. "There are scores of minority and niche programmers as well as low-powered television stations clamoring for leased-access channels who have been unable to afford it until now," Mr. Schwartzman said.

The proposed change is part of a broader overhaul of FCC rules governing the cable industry that could include new rules aimed at promoting competition. The agency is expected to issue a study soon on market concentration that opens the way for new rules aimed at promoting "diversity of information sources."

The FCC declined to comment. A spokesman for the National Cable & Telecommunications Association, cable's lobby group, declined to comment.

Separately, Mr. Martin is expected to unveil a media-ownership overhaul plan as soon as today, a move that could open the door to regulatory approval of the sale of **Tribune Co.**

According to several people familiar with the plan, Mr. Martin is likely to call for a relaxation of the cross-media ownership ban, which prohibits one company from owning both a newspaper and radio or television station in the same market. Mr. Martin has favored scrapping this rule.

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