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Congress Continues FCC Squeeze

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By Kim Sunderland

Some members of Congress have continued their assault on the FCC (www.fcc.gov) in their attempt to curb the commission's powers by cutting its budget and imposing time limits on its deliberation of telecom industry mergers.

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This summer, the U.S. House of Representatives (www.house.gov) passed a spending bill that cut \$2 billion from the FCC budget covering the fiscal year from October 1999 to October 2000. The bill reduced funds for salaries and expenses for the media and legislative affairs office. The action was followed by a vote in a House subcommittee that limits the FCC's authority over mergers by setting a 90-day deadline on the inquiries.

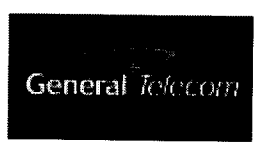
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FCC Chairman William E. Kennard says that if the Senate agrees to the budget cut "it would be devastating," considering the crunch the FCC is under with a booming telecommunications industry.



The history between the agency and Congress is full of antagonism, particularly when a largely Republican Congress continues to duke it out with a predominantly Democratic FCC.



But cutting off the FCC's budget isn't the right

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thing to do, says Lawrence J. Spiwak, president of the Phoenix Center for Advanced Legal & Economic Public Policy Studies (www.phoenix-center.org) in Washington.



Spiwak says the FCC has come under a lot of fire for reviewing mergers, but Congress is acting as if it just wants the commission to stamp licenses.

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"This is not fair to the FCC," he says. "Congress is not as interested in getting the right answer as getting silence from its constituents and has opted for the easiest way to get what it wants: Rather than do anything meaningful, it has cut the money.

"There is still a tremendous amount of problems in the U.S. telecom industry," Spiwak says.



In fact, lobbyist Roy M. Neel, president and CEO of the U.S. Telecom Association (www.usta.org), which represents the incumbent phone companies, has called for the FCC to be "sunset" by 2004.



But the commission isn't down and out yet. Possibly in a backhanded slap to Congress, the FCC plans to publish a list of the U.S. telephone companies with the most consumer complaints in an attempt to shame them into making improvements.



The FCC will analyze all incoming telephone customer service calls to its complaint hotline during September and issue a report soon after detailing individual company names, statistics and standings, the FCC says.

"Consumers need good customer service information to make informed choices in today's competitive telecommunications marketplace," says Lorraine Miller, head of the FCC's Consumer Information Bureau.

In addition to ramping up pressure on local, long-distance and wireless carriers to improve, the study is an attempt to work with the companies by alerting them of problems they may not know about, she adds.

Complaints can be filed online at www.fcc.gov/cib/ccformpage.html.