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Columbia — Missouri is fast on its way to giving telecommunication giants the freedom to increase phone bill rates in areas where customers have no alternative choice for phone line service.

The bill would also make Missouri the first, and only, state in the nation to regulate Voice Over IP (VoIP) services. AT&T, Embarq and CenturyTel are pushing legislators in Jefferson City, Mo., to pass House Bill 1779, which could be voted on as early as April 14. If passed, HB 1779 would

almost certainly translate into phone bill rate increases for countless Missouri residents.

Missouri legislators passed a very similar bill in 2005, the impact of which can still be felt in many large and mid-sized Missouri cities. St. Louis and Kansas City have seen a rate increase of 25 percent since the bill was put into law.

Moreover, rural areas have been hit even worse since then.

Communities such as Sedalia, Cape
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Girardeau, Hannibal and Mexico have endured a 43 percent increase in their phone bill since 2005.

Legislators are being led to believe HB 1779 is "pro-competition" because it allows smaller, rural Missouri towns currently designated as "non-competitive" under law to be classified as "competitive." This bill would do so simply by loosening the criteria for what is considered a competitive exchange, regardless of whether the citizens of these communities have another phone company to choose from.

When an incumbent phone company is classified as competitive, it is free to charge a rate compliant with its statewide average. If HB 1779 is put into practice, members of rural communities could end up paying a rate set at the phone company's discretion without any local alternatives to drive down the price.

Missouri residents aren't the only ones who would feel the pinch. Small businesses and non-profit organizations operating with one phone line would be vulnerable to these rate increases as well. Additionally, for all customers with two or more phone lines, price regulations would be completely and automatically removed statewide. Historically, companies such as AT&T,

CenturyTel and Embarq have in general charged the maximum rate the law would allow in these areas.

"As a competitive service provider in Missouri, Socket embraces all efforts to promote competition," Carson Coffman, co-owner of Socket, said. "This bill, however, works against true competition. We hope those affected will mobilize and persuade their state Senator to strike down HB 1779 before it's too late."

For more details on HB 1779 and how Missouri residents can contact their state Senator, visit www.socket.net/HB1779.

Founded in 1994, Socket is a Missouri-based telephone and Internet service provider with the largest service coverage in the state. Socket is a privately held company that provides business customers a choice for local and long-distance phone service. It combines the highest quality customer service with in-depth technical knowledge to provide customized phone service packages. Socket also offers high-speed DSL and accelerated dial-up Internet service to both business and residential clients. Socket provides service to more than 20,000 customers in more than 400 cities across Missouri. For additional information, please visit: <http://www.socket.net>.

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