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FCC CHAIRMAN KENNARD CALLS FOR MORE BENEFITS TO PUBLIC FROM \$70 BILLION GIVE-AWAY OF 2ND DIGITAL TV CHANNEL

Kennard outlines strategy to fulfill broadcasters' public interest obligation by enhancing democratic process and details plan to jump-start digital TV and wireless web

New York – William E. Kennard, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), urged the television broadcast industry to ensure that the power of television is put to the service of the American democracy. In a speech at the Museum of Television and Radio today, entitled “What Does \$70 Billion Buy You Anyway,” Kennard said, “When we realize that television should not only entertain us as consumers, but engage and ennoble us as citizens, we will have come a long way to establishing the 21st century’s first true electronic democracy.”

Kennard outlined a five-part strategy as a framework to rethink broadcasters’ public interest obligations:

[1] Stations should commit to carry every single presidential debate, as well as cover state and local races. He said television reached “a new low” when the NBC and Fox networks chose to preempt the October 1 debate for sports and entertainment programming.

[2] Stations should recommit to show more public service announcements (PSAs) during peak viewing hours to educate viewers about issues of the day;

[3] Stations should provide free time to candidates for federal office during the last few weeks of an election season;

[4] The broadcast industry should establish a code of conduct for good citizenship by broadcasters; and,

[5] On October 16, the Commission will hold a public meeting to further explore how television can enhance democracy by contributing to political discourse, serving local communities and protecting children.

On the conversion from analog to digital television, Kennard said, “Broadcasters have decided to sit on these two highly valuable properties – licensed to them for free by Congress – for as long as they can.” He warned broadcasters, “Squatting on empty spectrum smothers innovation and endangers America’s lead in new technologies.”

(more)

As part of a three-part plan to push the conversion to digital TV and free up spectrum for the wireless web, Kennard urged Congress to:

[1] Eliminate the “85% loophole” in the law thereby making 2006 a hard deadline for broadcasters to return their analog channels;

[2] Adopt a requirement that all new television sets include the capability to receive digital TV signals by a given date, such as January 1, 2003;

[3] Impose an escalating “spectrum squatters fee” on broadcasters if they do not meet the 2006 conversion deadline. The proceeds from the fee could help fund the digital conversion of public television and support programming that serves the public but is not provided by the market.

He spoke before an audience that included students and representatives of the public interest community and the broadcast industry.

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