

Remarks of Commissioner Meredith Attwell Baker

Consumer Advisory Committee

December 4, 2009

This Committee plays a critical role in our work at the Commission. You tell us where we are falling down – both in government and industry – and you should know we are listening. I applaud all of your dedication and willingness to serve.

I know you have a full agenda and I don't want to keep you from it, but I would like to briefly touch on one area where our work is nearing completion, the DTV transition, and two others that this Committee has taken a lead on, accessibility issues and truth-in-billing matters.

The recently completed DTV transition is an area where your voice contributed to a successful and relatively pain-free experience for consumers. The DTV transition required all of us – the FCC, industry, local governments and civic groups, interest groups, consumers, and the NTIA – to work collaboratively to streamline and simplify what could have been a harrowing experience for many households.

You should know this work continues. Just a few weeks ago, the FCC – in conjunction with CEA, NAB, and others – released further aids to help consumers understand the antenna issues associated with the DTV transition. I know this was one of the issues that many of you flagged as warranting greater focus, and I urge you to continue to highlight additional transition-related issues that merit our attention. I also want to take this opportunity to commend the FCC staff for continuing its work post June 12.

Now looking forward, I am appreciative of this Committee's efforts to address accessibility issues in a digital world – you have shown a light on the problem. Digital technology provides great promise to expand opportunities for all Americans, but it has also created great implementation challenges. As programmers, broadcasters, pay TV providers and consumer electronic companies work to bring advanced technologies into our homes, too many consumers have been left without the services they need with no clear path to resolve the issue.

In May, Acting Chairman Copps established a technical working group to review digital captioning and related issues – a long-standing recommendation from this Committee. Those of you from industry, thank you for letting us borrow your engineers for this important group. As a general matter, my experience is that problems get solved when we let our engineers sit together alone. By bringing all the stakeholders together, I am hopeful that best practices will evolve and a better understanding of the technical issues will translate to improved service for consumers. I look forward to learning more about these ongoing efforts.

Similarly, this Committee is raising the profile of consumer complaint procedures and truth-in-billing matters. I urge the same collaborative spirit guide those discussions as we seek to find best practices amongst and within industries. We need to know what specific billing and service issues are not being resolved, and which industries are not stepping up to serve their consumers effectively. In this, we must be data driven.

Once we identify quantitatively and qualitatively the problem areas, I challenge providers to work aggressively to address any infirmities. It is important that we do not regulate at first sign of a problem. Rather, industry should have the opportunity to respond to consumers' concerns. All regulation—no matter how well-intentioned—imposes costs, and may frustrate the efforts of providers to act in a more consumer-friendly and responsive manner than one-sized-fits-all regulation allows. All of this is not to suggest the Commission abdicate its responsibility. We must be prepared to act if the market fails to address the issue, but a government-imposed resolution is never optimal for consumers.

Thank you all again for your efforts, and I look forward to working together.