

# Referendum — voice of the citizens?

A referendum is a great part of democracy. At no other time do citizens have an even comparable opportunity to influence the course of politics. For a reason, referenda are often called the people's voice. Most recently, the people of the Tri-Cities told the local government not to pursue the broadband project any further. But I have my doubts, if it was really the citizens' voice which said "No."

Anybody who tried to understand the Tri-Cities broadband project knew that Batavia, Geneva and St. Charles had a striking case for success. The key to get to this conclusion was to get facts. And not just glossy fliers out of the mailbox. Unfortunately, huge corporations once again gambled with our minds, our money and delivered a stunning job to hurt the interests of the Tri-Cities residents.

If passed, the broadband project would have been able to serve every resident of the Tri-Cities with high-speed internet access and high-quality cable television, long before Comcast and SBC will. It would have slashed cable television, Internet and phone fees by at least 15 percent for virtually any household. The telcos could not advertise their own, 30-year-old systems against the proposed Tri-Cities broadband project. Instead, they had to play with traditional fears. The fear of taxes — which in the end defeated the referendum.

No matter, if one voted against this referendum because of this fear or because of threats of being laid-off, we did not necessarily avoid higher bills. However, we handed those two companies a blank check for more money — a lot more money. We gave them room for new rate increases, less customer service and to keep holding us captive in regards of offered services. We also said "no" to the opportunity to attract new businesses, which could have created much needed new jobs.

If you apply the same third-grade math as SBC and Comcast did, those increases will cost the average household in the Tri-Cities area more than \$8,000 over the next 15 years. Compared to the \$62 million tax increase



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SBC and Comcast made you believe, our 30,000-plus households will have to swallow a whopping \$240 million instead, if they keep increasing their rates as they did in the previous years.

A broadband connection makes the life of my family a lot easier. My wife and I are able to telecommute and spend more time with our children. The broadband project would have laid the foundation for more learning opportunities for our children. The fiber lines would have increased the value of our home. The new generation of cable television would have been available. And all that was in reach for less money than we pay today — without tax increase.

Being involved in the promotion of a referendum for the first time and being a native of Germany and therefore unfamiliar with the "Chicago election style" — it was a stunning experience for me, how corporations can bend legal limits to protect their revenues. Enron and Tyco are not isolated cases. When it comes to deception, SBC and Comcast are not really different. I also do not give up the hope that journalists, who insulted pro-broadband residents as "whiners" and "losers," will learn one day that it was the wrong and expensive decision to vote "no." But probably we have to get burned first, before we learn.

In the end, we are all citizens of the Tri-Cities area with the same interest: to increase the life-quality in our hometown. Nobody wants higher taxes. I highly encourage you to educate yourself on the broadband topic and learn how this great technology sets the path for the future of our children.

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