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USCCB committee chair asks Senate to preserve cable access channels

by Catholic News Service

The head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Communications has asked the Senate to support a bill that would preserve the presence of community access cable channels on local cable systems.

"I encourage you to support these local channels and the local programming they carry by supporting" the Community Access Preservation Act, said a letter Wednesday to members of the Senate by Bishop John Wester of Salt Lake City, the USCCB communications committee chairman.

A mechanism in the bill, sponsored by Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., would provide "reliable funding," according to Wester, for the access channels, known in cable parlance as "PEG" channels for the three major types of access channels there are: public, education, and government.

In recent years, PEG channels have disappeared because of new statewide cable laws which failed to include funding of PEG channels by cable operators.

"The loss of funding for these channels," Wester said, "has significantly reduced the 'video equivalent of the speaker's soapbox' which the legislative history of the PEG provisions of the 1984 Cable Act sought to create" with PEG channels.

"PEG channels are local channels used by religious organizations, schools, local government and community organizations which offer free or low-cost outlets for public service, informational and religious programming," Wester said.

"These channels increase the diversity of voices on our airwaves, promote broader civic engagement in

local governmental process and provide an avenue for noncommercial religious programming."

Wester added, "In a time when religious programming faces increasing challenges to its voice being given an equal platform, PEG channels offer a venue for these programs to be accessed. This is of particular importance for the elderly, disabled or homebound who long to remain connected to their religious communities but are unable to take part in their religious or community activities."

The bill was referred Tuesday to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.

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