**Letter to the editor in response to USA Today's "Bell Monopolies Push to Disconnect Competition" editorial**

To the editor:

The Jan. 14 editorial "Bell Monopolies Push to Disconnect Competition" denounces a proposal that would slam the door on local telephone choice. Consumer advocates across the nation agree. We believe that competition can only survive if competitors are able to lease vital parts of the network from the Baby Bells at reasonable rates.

It's no wonder that the Bells are heavily lobbying the FCC and state regulators to eliminate the current wholesale structure and hike the prices they can charge other companies to access the local network. Competitors are finally able to play in the backyards of the regional Bell companies. But the Bells don't want to be friendly neighbors. They would much rather enjoy the monopoly power and guaranteed profits that were taken away by Congress seven years ago with the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act.

At whose expense? Consumers. They could see competitive local telephone markets from California and Texas to Ohio and New York disappear, resulting in less choices and higher prices. Meanwhile, recent FCC data shows that incumbent providers still control nearly 90 percent of the market nationwide. Many residential consumers still have no choices because the transition from a regulated to a competitive environment is not yet complete.

Growth and competition must be allowed to continue. We cannot afford to take a giant step backward and ignore the interests of those that deserve and demand the benefits of choice - our nation's consumers.

Sincerely,

Robert S. Tongren   
President, National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates   
Ohio Consumers' Counsel   
(614) 466-8574