



Legislation Summary:

An Act to modernize funding for community media programming

Initial bill number(s): H.74/S.34

Sponsors: Rep. Joan Meschino, Rep. Mathew Muratore, Sen. Jason Lewis

What the bill does, why LWVMA supports it, and the League position relative to this bill.

This bill would impose a 5% fee on digital streaming programming providers such as Netflix, Disney+, Amazon Prime TV, etc., which use public rights of way to sell their services in Massachusetts but currently do not pay anything to support the public infrastructure, including poles, conduits and such on the public rights of way, needed to deliver this service. The fee is 5% of revenues generated in Massachusetts. The bill follows the model of the 5% cable franchise fee on cable providers to support that infrastructure. The money collected would be distributed like this: 20% to the state general fund, 40% to municipalities, and 40% to community media operations (local cable TV operations).

Community media—the town cable station—has been funded by the 5% of gross annual cable revenues generated from the town that cable operators are required by federal law to provide to support local programming. But those cable revenues are dropping as consumers switch from cable to streaming services. This bill seeks to have the streaming services contribute to funding community media outlets to offset lower revenues from the cable companies. The revenue generated by this bill would also go to maintain the infrastructure in towns that allows both cable and streaming services to reach customers.

This may seem an odd bill for LWVMA to support. But local Leagues rely on their town cable stations to make candidate forums and other League programming more widely available to town residents than depending on in-person audiences alone. Additionally, the League has expressed its concern with the disappearance of too many local newspapers in towns across the state. Local cable television fills some of that information void by recording Select Board, City Council, school committee, finance committee and countless other municipal board and committee meetings, offering many of them live, or broadcast later, and, in most towns, also available as video-on-demand to anyone with an internet connection, whether they are a cable subscriber or not. The local cable stations will also be key players as towns transition to hybrid meeting formats combining in-person and remote access to municipal meeting. Declining cable television revenue threatens the financial stability of local cable television operations. Streaming services use the infrastructure that was put in place to deliver cable and internet service, and it seems only fair that they contribute to maintaining that infrastructure and to the support of local cable access operations that were considered so important to a community that the Federal government required cable companies to fund them in exchange for cable franchises in a town.

The League of Women Voters of the United States believes that democratic government depends upon the informed and active participation of its citizens at all levels of government. The League further

believes that governmental bodies must protect the citizen's right to know by giving adequate notice of proposed actions, holding open meetings, and making public records accessible. (LWVUS) (1984) *Where We Stand* [Preface \(lwvma.org\)](#) p. 14