Schmitt outlines national communications highway

Speaking before the opening-day session at COMPCON 78 Fall, Senator Harrison ("Jack") Schmitt of New Mexico proposed a national "communications highway" concept to be embodied in a new telecommunications act.

Acknowledging that the communications act of 1934 has fostered a national communications system unequalled in the world, Schmitt nevertheless pointed out that the act and its interpretations have been based on a now outdated technological assumption—that from a communications point of view there are inherent differences between voice, mail, money, pictures, radio, and data.

Those who drafted the 1934 act had no way of foreseeing the effects of computer technology, wideband transmission, satellite communication, low-noise electronics, high-speed processing, high-density data storage and retrieval, and the information management concepts that have grown up as a result of networking.

According to Schmitt, a new telecommunications act must not only take these technological developments (and the more to come) into account, but must realign the body of law governing the nation's telecommunications system to support the establishment and maintenance of a regulated, profit-making, monopolistic public utility that provides the "highway system" over which all "fit, willing, and able" providers of communications and information services can transport their wares.

The difficult question, he said (and the one that has occupied Congress, the courts, and private companies—including AT&T and IBM—for years) is where to draw the boundary between the public utility and the private service providers. "That's the new concept for telecommunications. We have defined most of our law in terms of technological barriers that don't exist anymore."

As for the even knottier question of whether the regulated utility should be allowed to compete in the service market, Schmitt admitted he had no answer: "It is not clear as yet which service or combination of services should be included in the utility's responsibilities." He said the problem was to design the legislative aspects of the system in such a way that competition by the utility was not unfair competition.

"In hardware I think you can," he said, "but in services I'm not sure. Having monopolistic control over the network builds in some very strong inherent advantages in the competition to provide services."

Sen. Jack Schmitt (R-N.M.) delivered COMPCON keynote, calling for national public telecommunications network utility.

IBM Vice President and Chief Scientist Lewis Branscomb outlined telecommunications technology and policy issues.