



Walton County Democratic Party
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Ray Padgett, Chairman

In April, the Florida Public Service Commission refused a request by State Attorney General Charlie Crist to reconsider its approval of the biggest telephone rate hike in the state's history. Crist said the rate hike would "adversely affect tens of thousands of telephone customers, especially the elderly." Do you support or oppose the commission's decision, and why?

In May 2003 the Republican controlled house and senate overwhelmingly passed a telecommunications bill that allowed unprecedented local telephone rate increases. This bill, written by phone lobbyists, with the assistance of Florida Republican House leader Johnny Byrd and supported by Governor Jeb Bush, managed to ramrod the measure through, which was sprung on state house and senate members with less than three weeks left in the session. During these few days, a small army of over 100 telecommunications lobbyists swarmed on the capitol and swayed legislators, while Florida citizens and utility watchdog groups had no time to react. This was a lopsided victory for the telecommunications companies and Governor Bush signed the bill without delay.

In December 2003 the Public Service Commission (PSC) approved the phone company requests for rate hikes, which could jump, according to AARP Florida officials, by nearly \$1 billion over the next three years. After this first round of increases (yearly over the next three years) phone companies can then raise their rates another 20% per year without PSC approval. This bill also increases phone installation charges and bars cities and counties from regulating cable TV quality and responding to billing complaints. The ultimate hypocrisy of this tax-cut crowd is that our phone taxes will increase millions of dollars per year when our monthly phone bills increase.

How could something so outrageous and unfair to Florida's working and retired citizens be passed by the legislature, signed by the governor and approved by the PSC? After all, Governor Bush vetoed an almost identical bill in 2002, during his re-election campaign. Direct campaign contributions, fund raising parties, lavish "meet your phone company lobbyist" parties, and jobs in the telecommunications industry after your "public service" is complete, grease the wheels for such a "free enterprise" travesty. Telecommunication companies stepped up their contributions (over \$3.2 million according to the Miami Herald) after Governor Bush vetoed the 2002 phone rate hike bill. Congressman Johnny Byrd, the bills chief proponent, stated after passage of this bill "If you have a free market, the consumer benefits" and Governor Bush predicted a "robust market". Corporate gifts

of this nature are not free enterprise and robust only applies to the phone company's bottom line.

Eighty-four percent of Florida registered voters oppose this bill, according to a St. Petersburg Times survey. This prompted representative Johnny Byrd, who is running for the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Senator Bob Graham, to change his position and sponsor a bill to repel the phone rate hike. This attempt failed, especially after representative Byrd's now infamous comment stating that his fellow house members were like sheep and needed a herder such as himself to give guidance. Representative Byrd discovered that he was just a member of the herd. All our local senate and house representatives voted for the phone rate increase bill – representatives Don Brown and Bev Kilmer and senator Durrell Peaden voted yes on this bill.

The Walton County Democratic Party supports any effort to block or repel this record setting, unjust and unfair telephone rate increase. We believe such an increase would be a devastating blow to Florida's citizens. This bill stifles free enterprise with the false promise of competition and greater services in the future. We believe voters should let their disgust for this bill be shown by voting against all representatives who supported it. We further recommend that a new law be passed that severely restricts PSC members from being employed by companies they are appointed to control, instead of the current two year limitation on hiring PSC members. This telephone rate increase epitomizes what happens when large corporations gain control of our government.