

Every Saturday, we'll present these short-take editorials that reflect on some of this week's news.

Moving Olelo channels a bad idea

Public-access TV is not just for policy wonks. In addition to allowing citizens to access and watch governmental meetings, it also offers a broadcast venue for anyone to exercise their freedom of speech. Every effort should be made to keep this public forum as open and robust as possible, not diminish it.

That's why Spectrum Cable should ditch its plan to move public-access channels from well-positioned and long-established spots — on Oahu, Olelo's channels are 49-54 — to less-desirable channels, 182-187.

"We're being exiled to digital Siberia, where no one wants to go," said Sanford Inouye, CEO of Olelo Community Media. He, Maui counterpart Jay April and others are rightly worried about viewership drops, which would reflect diminished participation in civic and free-speech engagement.

Spectrum says its system upgrade will offer better picture quality, more high-definition channels, faster internet and other features. Much of that upgrade, including the digital change, was mandated when the state Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs two years ago OK'd transfer of Oceanic Time Warner Cable's cable franchises to Charter Communications, Spectrum's parent.

But on Friday, state regulators put a temporary halt to Spectrum's digital overhaul, citing an error in the company's notice to subscribers that its digital converter boxes could access only channels 2-99.

Public, educational and government access television (PEG) is a matter of law, created by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1969-71 and mandated under the 1984 Cable Communications Act. Channel-spot location, though, is at the cable provider's discretion. In fact, Hawaiian Telcom, Oahu's other cable provider, is keeping the public-access channels as they are, right where they've been for at least 20 years.

Spectrum's plan gives a glimpse into an ominous future now that the FCC has decided to end net neutrality. There are real concerns that the nation's most powerful service providers will be making content decisions that are not in the public's best interest.

All of Hawaii's four mayors have sent letters opposing the PEG moves into "digital Siberia." They should be joined in that opposition by all civic-minded people.