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Daily News Opinion**COMPASS: Points of view from the community****It's imperative that Congress keep Internet access tax-free****BY SEN. TED STEVENS**

The Internet has provided a powerful economic boost to our nation, especially in rural areas. It has become an important everyday tool for millions of Americans, a valuable educational and medical resource, and an essential mechanism for communication and commerce.

To ensure the Internet's benefits are available to as many people as possible, obstacles to affordable high-speed Internet must be eliminated. One way is to prevent taxes from being imposed on Internet access. Such taxes drive up the overall costs of Internet use, which would be an added burden to consumers and could discourage increased use of the Internet.

Congress is currently debating



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taxes on the Internet.

whether to extend a moratorium on Internet access taxes. The moratorium affects many services that American consumers have come to rely on, including wireless transmission devices, cable modems and Internet service over phone lines. Without further congressional action, the moratorium will expire on Nov. 1. If it is not extended, any state or locality could move quickly to impose new

By keeping Internet access tax-free, Congress can help ensure continued confidence in the Internet as a powerful consumer and business tool in the United States. In many cases, consumers already pay heavy cell phone and wire line access taxes. Additional taxes for Internet access would only expand the digital divide between those who can afford

broadband access and those who cannot. Without affordable access to the Internet, our nation will fall behind in the global economy.

Affordable access to the Internet is particularly important to businesses in rural and remote communities in Alaska and across our nation. Thanks to the Internet, many small business owners no longer depend on having a physical storefront to do business. Alaskans can use the Internet to market goods to customers in the Lower 48 and around the world, which is crucial for small businesses located in our remote villages.

Improved broadband access has also eliminated distance barriers for education and other services, providing rural areas with a higher qual-

ity of life. Rural Alaskans of all ages rely heavily on distance learning to pursue their studies without leaving their families and communities. A tax on Internet access would unfairly penalize those who are working to better themselves and their communities.

Since 1998, Congress has extended this moratorium two times. Every time the moratorium is set to expire, there is a danger that it will not be renewed or a possibility that exceptions will be carved into the law. That is why I support extending the moratorium for as long as possible or even permanently.

Sen. Ted Stevens has represented Alaska in the U.S. Senate since 1968.