

The House of Representatives opened its debate on delaying the digital TV transition late Tuesday, with Rep. Rick Boucher, D-Va., expressing regret about the extra expense the delay would create for broadcasters, but adding, "at this juncture we simply have no choice."

The House then put off a vote on the legislation until Wednesday.

The Senate passed the same legislation Monday night on a unanimous voice vote. House approval would send the issue to President Obama.

Rep. Boucher, chairman of the House Energy & Commerce Committee's telecom panel, said the request to delay the transition to June 12 from Feb. 17 was "taking place in predictable but extraordinary circumstances."

He cited concerns that according to Nielsen, 6.5 million households could lose their TV signal if the transition goes forward on Feb. 17.

"We can't permit the level of dislocation that would otherwise occur," he said. "This is not a step we take lightly or frivolously. It is one in which we have no choice."

He said that without action, the potential disruption to viewers would be too great, citing TV networks as among the supporters of the delay.

Republicans immediately questioned any delay and urged the House to reject a request to quickly consider the measure.

"This is a solution looking for a problem," said Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas, ranking Republican on the Energy & Commerce Committee. "We can do nothing worse than delay this date."

Rep. Barton said that the Feb. 17 date was originally chosen back in 2005 because it fell after the Super Bowl, before the Masters Golf Tournament and before March Madness college basketball playoffs.

He said any problems distributing the \$40 coupons for digital converter boxes could be easily fixed without delaying the transition. He and other Republicans further warned a postponement would be costly to broadcasters and delay emergency services from getting some of the spectrum that was supposed to be freed up with the switch.

"We are holding this up because 5% of the nation has not hooked up yet," said Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb. He warned that the delay would "only confuse customers and hurt public safety."

Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., also warned a delay would be expensive for TV stations, and cited one in his district that said it would cost the station \$1 million to air both a digital and analog signal for four more months.

The legislation the Senate passed and which the House is considering would delay the nation's digital switchover, but give TV stations the option of switching early with approval of the Federal Communications Commission.

A number of TV stations are expected to switch before June 12. The legislation also allows household whose coupons for digital converter boxes expired unused to reapply for a new coupon.

