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Lee Terry and 'Star Wars' creator join push to aid Internet access

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WASHINGTON -- Rep. Lee Terry of Nebraska cast himself Tuesday in the role of a Jedi Knight during a hearing on federal telecommunications subsidies.

Terry said he and Rep. Rick Boucher of Virginia "are the Luke Skywalkers, riding in to save the Universal Service Fund from those who want to destroy it -- the Darth Vaders."

Sci-fi references were flying in honor of "Star Wars" creator George Lucas, who testified that Congress should ensure that schools and libraries have free access to the Internet.

The hearing before the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet featured a general discussion of the Universal Service Fund.

The fund was started in the 1930s to help spread copper wire phone service into rural areas and today is supported by billions of dollars brought in every year from fees charged to phone customers.

The money goes to help maintain phone systems in rural areas and to provide discounted telecommunications services to schools and libraries.

The modern rise of wireless carriers and Internet-based phone service has complicated the collection and distribution of those dollars, however, and has led to calls for an overhaul.

Some on Capitol Hill want to scrap the USF as an unnecessary and ever-increasing tax on phone users.

Terry, a Republican, and Boucher, a Democrat, have proposed legislation to restrain the growth of the program and transition it into providing broadband Internet access to rural and under-served areas.

Randolph May, president of the Free State Foundation think tank, argued against that approach.

May questioned whether broadband subsidies are truly needed, and he particularly objected to

using the old universal system to spread broadband Internet access.

"To do so would perpetuate a system that is economically inefficient, wasteful and competition-suppressing," he said.

Other witnesses touted the importance of making service accessible to low-income areas and prisons.

Lucas got the most attention, however, as he autographed copies of his testimony for congressional aides.

He called on Congress to lift the \$2.25 billion annual cap on the portion of the USF that provides telecommunications discounts to schools and libraries. He said the goal should be to provide all schools and libraries with free Internet access.

In the future, the federal government will auction off parts of the public airwaves for use in providing wireless services, Lucas said. Lawmakers should simply require successful bidders to provide free service to schools and libraries, he said.

Terry raised concerns about that approach. In the past, he said, the government has struggled to find bidders for the airwaves when it placed too many restrictions on their use.

He said many schools and libraries that receive subsidies are in high-income areas where local entities hardly need federal support to provide service.

Lucas has his own educational foundation and has long advocated a greater emphasis on technology and innovation in education.

