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San Mateo County Leaders and Environmental Advocates Call for Consumer Choice on White Pages

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Yee and Papan: Mandatory delivery of white pages wastes paper, energy, and scarce local government resources.

SACRAMENTO – Following the successful efforts of Cleveland, Ohio and Miami, Florida, California could become the largest jurisdiction to give telephone customers a choice in receiving the white pages directory. Today, Senator Leland Yee (D-San Francisco/San Mateo) and Millbrae Councilwoman Gina Papan announced they will pursue state legislation to prohibit telephone companies from delivering the white pages unless the customer opts-in to receiving it.

"The requirement that phone companies must deliver the white pages comes from an era before the internet and other means of obtaining phone numbers," said Yee. "At a time when Californians are looking for ways to reduce our carbon footprint, we should give them that choice, particularly when very few customers still use the white pages."

"Ending the unnecessary distribution of the white pages is a step forward that we can take at the local level to address the global issue of climate change. I am proud to take the lead on this issue to help save the environment and reduce local recycling costs," said Millbrae City Councilmember Gina Papan. "I would like to thank Senator Yee for his responsiveness in taking on this important legislation on our behalf."

Beginning in 1995, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) has required the delivery of the white pages as a part of the definition of "universal service" that all telephone companies must provide. At the time of the CPUC decision, it was thought that providing free white pages every year would "minimize the calls to directory assistance and [would] promote the wide distribution of yellow page advertising" (CPUC Decision 96-10-066).

According to the Product Stewardship Institute, telephone books represent significant tonnage in the waste stream (660,000 tons per year). Local governments currently bear costs to recycle and/or dispose of phone books, and some areas experience limited or absent opportunities to recycle. According to a report by the EPA, under national average landfill, recycling, and manufacturing conditions, not publishing a phone book reduces greenhouse gases by about 3 times as much as recycling (relative to landfilling).

"Phonebook Free SF fully endorses the efforts of Senator Yee and Councilwoman Gina Papan to propose and pass new legislation to stop the wasteful mass distribution of unwanted phonebooks," said Lloyd Nimetz, Founding Organizer of Phonebook Free. "Asking phonebook companies to limit their deliveries only to citizens who want to receive them is a clear step towards greater fiscal responsibility and environmental sustainability."

Under the legislation announced today, telephone companies would be required to get a customer's consent before a white page directory could be delivered. Although the legislation does not dictate how this will be accomplished, it is envisioned that telephone companies will obtain permission via the monthly bill or by establishing a toll free number for customers.

The legislation will be introduced when the Legislature reconvenes in January.

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