

ANNA GOMEZ*

It is important to remember how monumental the task of implementing the 1996 Telecommunications Act¹ was for the Commission. Many of the deadlines in the Act were extremely challenging, starting with a thirty-day deadline to initiate a proceeding to overhaul the Universal Service regime. This was followed by numerous Notices of Proposed Rulemaking to be adopted within six months of passage of the Act. The first thing the staff did, therefore, was break down the Act into a series of tasks with deadlines. The Bureaus then designated teams to work each of the categories of proceedings. It was a very heady time, with even junior staff often given significant responsibility for implementing the provisions in the Act. The Act's multiple policy pieces formed a "competition puzzle" that the Commission had to, and did eventually complete.

The Commissioners and their advisors were heavily engaged from very early on in the process. We held numerous meetings to brief them on the Act and on our proposals for meeting each of the Act's mandates. When we delivered the drafts, we met with the Commissioners' advisors collectively to discuss their questions and proposed edits. The advisors negotiated their edits together in meetings that the staff attended, and the Bureaus helped facilitate those negotiations. For a staffer, it was a thrill to participate in these meetings, with the legal advisors debating the law and the policies—in an impressively collegial manner given the pressure that everyone was under—and reaching bipartisan consensus in time to meet the statutory deadlines.

In terms of substance, one of the major policy goals of the Act was opening local markets to competition. At the time, long distance and local service were still largely separate services, and the "death of long distance" was still to come. The Act did not anticipate mobile substitution, convergence, or VoIP as a competitor to the incumbent local exchange carriers. Therefore, most of the discussions within the Commission were about creating an environment that would allow local competition to flourish. The issues were extremely complex and hard fought, but in the end, the Commission was optimistic that its policies would drive lower prices and foster innovation. One can debate whether the Commission's policies were ultimately successful. But, at the time, even though there were many different points of view, there was an extraordinary sense of common purpose throughout the agency, as everyone was unified in the desire to meet the Act's objectives.

* Anna Gomez is a partner in the Washington, DC office of Wiley Rein LLP. During the implementation of the 1996 Act, she was Legal Counsel to the Chief of the Federal Communications Commission's Common Carrier Bureau.

1. Telecommunications Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-104, 110 Stat. 56.