



Sunday, February 10, 2008

<http://www.courier-journal.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080210/OPINION04/802100423/1016/OPINION>

OPED / John R. Hall

ConnectKentucky: a model for all

Bluegrass State closing the digital divide

By John R. Hall

Special to The Courier-Journal

Kentucky is a national technology leader. This is a grand statement that is neither a dream nor a slogan. Kentucky's national technology leadership position is a truth that has spread across the country and around the world as the ConnectKentucky partnership is held up as a model by a wide array of media, state and national policymakers, industry leaders, labor unions and numerous government agencies and officials.

ConnectKentucky's nation-leading work has been promoted as a model by *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The Economist*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times* and dozens of other national media outlets. Throughout the proceedings of the current U.S. Congress, lawmakers have routinely pointed to the technology advances in Kentucky, referencing ConnectKentucky as the model for shaping federal legislation that would enable a similar response in every state in the nation.

ConnectKentucky's success has spawned a national effort called Connected Nation, based in Bowling Green, Ky., and Washington, D.C., with offices in other parts of the nation. Connected Nation has established itself as the top resource for other states working to accelerate technology-based opportunities with the same level of excellence demonstrated in Kentucky.

National legislation

Having seen the promise of the ConnectKentucky model, Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., put forth the "Connect the Nation Act" to promote the creation of public/private partnerships in all states. The bill enables the model to be carried across the United States with the intention of achieving nationwide success similar to the Kentucky experience in closing the digital divide. Support for the "Connect the Nation Act" has grown sharply as representatives of ConnectKentucky have testified in front of numerous congressional committees over the last year. Most recently, the bill was included as a subsection of the Senate-passed version of the Farm Bill that could reach the President's desk in the coming weeks.

Through this exposure and with the establishment of Connected Nation as a Kentucky-based company, the commonwealth has been favorably positioned in a national conversation about meeting the challenges of the digital divide. Further, Congressional leaders have pointed out that the goals of ConnectKentucky are non-partisan in nature and good for all communities, all people and socioeconomic backgrounds Good for all America.

Non-partisan effort

The non-partisan nature of the discussion is consistent too with ConnectKentucky's history. The organization evolved in Kentucky over two governorships of different parties (Patton and Fletcher). Both can claim equal credit because the hearts of both were correctly placed -- in recognizing that technology growth is key to economic development.

More impressive than the positive publicity generated by ConnectKentucky are the non-profit group's results that have sparked a technology turn-around for the Commonwealth. ConnectKentucky connects people to technology in a way that helps improve their lives. Previously declining Kentucky communities are now connected to high-speed Internet (broadband) and it is making a difference. There are now more tech intensive jobs and companies in the commonwealth. Kentuckians of all ages can pursue life-long learning, enjoy improved health care and a superior quality of life. Consider the magnitude of the following results that have occurred through the work of ConnectKentucky and its public and private partners:

Broadband availability has grown from approximately 60 percent of households in 2004 to 95 percent today -- representing more than 546,000 previously unserved households and more than 1.4 million residents that can now access broadband;

Home broadband use has grown by 100 percent in the last three years. Kentucky Internet use now exceeds the national average after years of rankings at the bottom;

Computer ownership in Kentucky has risen by over 24 percent in the last three years, compared to the U.S. growth rate over the same period of approximately 4 percent;

More than \$743 million in private capital has been invested in telecommunications infrastructure over the past three years in Kentucky;

Strategic work plans

Every Kentucky county now has a strategic technology work plan as well as a meaningful website to make local communities more accessible.

53,875 jobs have been created or saved due to broadband acceleration;

\$20.9 million in self reported health care costs savings occur annually;

50.1 million pounds of CO₂ emissions are reduced per year in Kentucky as broadband allows for telecommuting and prevents unnecessary driving.

Impressive as these results may be, the work of ConnectKentucky has only now begun. Imagine the folly of the home builder who would celebrate the pouring of the foundation and consider his work done. ConnectKentucky is poised now to build upon the technology foundation that has been established -- working to seize the opportunities enabled when technology is applied to education, health care, community and economic development, small business growth and government service delivery.

In an open letter to the 2005 General Assembly, the late Dr. Thomas D. Clark wrote that, "The central question in assuring a brighter future for Kentucky is the wise investments in preparing its people to be capable and adaptable in a demanding technological age. This calls for wise and courageous leadership to recognize this fact."

Today those words ring truer than ever in light of the great opportunities that are now within our reach. The commonwealth should continue to call on ConnectKentucky to help lead the way to our technology-centric future as we courageously work to compete in a globally connected economy.

John R. Hall is chairman of the ConnectKentucky Steering Committee and the retired chairman and CEO of Ashland Oil Inc.