

Kentucky effort on broadband hailed as a model Project increased Internet access

<http://www.courier-journal.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070609/BUSINESS/706090388>

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June 9, 2007

ConnectKentucky, a program for expanding high-speed Internet access throughout the commonwealth, is being held up as a model for a proposed federal program.

The statewide effort in the past two years has helped increase broadband Internet use by 50 percent and has brought access to an additional 518,000 previously unserved Kentucky households, according to ConnectKentucky's Bowling Green headquarters.

Currently, 93 percent of Kentucky homes can access broadband, and ConnectKentucky expects every household to be capable of using high-speed Internet by the end of the year.

U.S. Rep. Rick Boucher, D-Va., on Thursday outlined a four-step plan to improve broadband Internet access to the many parts of the United States where people still rely on dial-up connections.

Boucher said he would be pushing federal lawmakers to adopt a program similar to ConnectKentucky, which uses a combination of public and private funding to promote DSL, cable, fixed wireless, satellite and other systems to blanket the state with service.

Boucher said two initiatives, one in the House and one in the Senate, would go some way towards this model.

"If it works in Kentucky, in such a rural state, I think it could provide wonders nationwide," said Boucher, who sits on the House Telecommunications Subcommittee and is one of the most active lawmakers on telecom issues. Through a combination of measures the country's "broadband crisis" could be resolved, he said.

ConnectKentucky was begun in 2002 under former Gov. Paul Patton and expanded under Gov. Ernie Fletcher.

"Kentucky, as a microcosm, has demonstrated the importance of the national broadband discussion and the relevance of technology to America's ability to compete," ConnectKentucky Chief Executive Brian Mefford said during testimony to the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee.

"I've testified to three different committees and have had numerous meetings in D.C. with key members of Congress who have been tasked with finding a national solution and a national policy to meet the broadband challenge in every state," Mefford said in an interview yesterday. "Kentucky is truly a technology model for the rest of the country," he said.

Two and a half years ago, Kentucky ranked near the bottom of all states when measured by the percentage of households with broadband service. It now exceeds the national average, Mefford said.

In addition, more than 14,500 technology jobs have been created in the state over the last two years.

The growth was especially significant in information technology positions -- 3.1 percent in Kentucky, compared with 0.1 percent nationally.

The state's technological advances "should be a source of pride to Kentuckians," Mefford said, and they also may spur investments from companies that measure communities by "their technology savvy."

"When Kentucky is viewed as the national leader in this area, companies are now putting Kentucky on their short list when it comes to identifying states to invest in," Mefford said.

There is some debate over the relevance of these rankings, but they are cited often by lawmakers and regulators in the context of broadband policy. Even though the United States has the largest number of residential broadband users in the world, many rural and poorer areas don't have such access.

The first law change that would help improve this, Boucher said, would be to reform the Universal Service Fund to promote the expansion of broadband service.

According to a bill backed by Boucher and Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., recipients of subsidies from the fund would have to agree to offer broadband service to their entire geographic service area within five years.

Boucher said the next step would be to allow local governments to offer commercial broadband service, similar to when electricity service was first made widely available.

"In my mind offering broadband today is every bit as important as the emerging new technology of 100 years ago -- electricity," he said.

Dow Jones Newswires contributed to this story.

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