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W.Va. Senate bill would expand high-speed Internet access

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. - State officials and Internet service providers have a common goal in getting more West Virginians broadband Internet access, but whether it's a matter of supply or demand is uncertain.

Roughly a quarter of households in West Virginia don't have any access to broadband Internet service. A Senate bill is aimed at identifying where those households are and finding ways to get them connected.

But in the 75 percent of households that do have access, only a relatively small number are subscribers, according to telecommunications industry experts.

"It's a chicken and egg thing," said Sen. John Unger, D-Berkeley, the legislation's sponsor. "If you don't have the service, you can't create a demand, and they won't provide the service unless there's a demand."

Unger's bill, which was endorsed Wednesday by the Senate Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, aims to address both supply and demand, by creating public-private partnerships to increase broadband access throughout rural parts of the state. A similar plan, called ConnectKentucky, started about two years ago in neighboring Kentucky.

But the bill would also aim to increase demand by teaming with early childhood education programs, to introduce young children and their families to broadband Internet in classrooms. The idea is that once families see the benefits of high-speed connection to the Internet, they'll want it in their homes.

"We put the technology in the classroom and build out from there," Unger said.

Representatives of the state's cable Internet providers greeted the bill cautiously at a meeting of the Senate committee Wednesday. They say that it's more a matter of selling consumers on the already available broadband than broadband being hard to get.

"We do have a tremendous level of build-out already in these services in this state," said Mark Polen, executive director of the West Virginia Cable Telecommunications Association. The biggest challenge facing providers, Polen said, is a relatively low rate of computer ownership in the state.

A 2006 study by the state Advanced Services Task Force found that roughly 27.5 percent of households in the state get broadband service, compared with 36.5 percent nationally. Additionally, the report found that 58 percent of homes in West Virginia have a computer, compared with 68 percent nationally.

Unger is hoping the early childhood education component of the bill would create new demand. But Sen. Andy McKenzie, R-Ohio, said companies should be expected to expand only when it becomes profitable.

"I don't understand the concept of forcing utilities to go into areas where it's just not feasible," he said. "There's not the demand. There's not the return on their investment."

However, in areas where broadband isn't yet available, interest is significant. A poll of residents in the rural counties of Barbour, Clay, Lincoln, McDowell, Webster and Wyoming last year found that 71 percent of respondents owned computers, and more than half would be willing to pay extra for better Internet access.

In Kentucky's experience, it was a matter of explaining the benefits of broadband, said Mark McElroy, vice president for communications and operations at ConnectKentucky.

"It's hard to accurately measure demand in the absence of availability of broadband," he said. Once people understand some of the benefits - McElroy cites as an example elementary schools putting daily reports on class progress online - demand increases sharply, he said.

In 2003, about 60 percent of households in Kentucky could subscribe to broadband. Today, roughly nine out of 10 households have access. Additionally, more than 488,000 households have subscribed to broadband in the last two years, the highest growth rate in the country, McElroy said.

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