

# Charleston Daily Mail

## W.Va. getting up to speed

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The effort to extend broadband access to all of West Virginia has received lots of attention but the state government's drive to harness technology is much bigger than that, West Virginia's chief technology officer said.

"Broadband is a component of the bigger initiative," said Kyle Schafer. "Another component of our three-year strategic plan is getting technology into the home. West Virginia ranks 45th in the nation in personal computers in the home."

The state Public Service Commission reported last month that only 59 percent of West Virginia households have a computer, compared to 69 percent of households nationwide.

Also, "We rank 47th in 'e-government,'" Schafer said. "Our citizens are going to the Division of Motor Vehicles and standing in line or standing in line to get a nursing license. We're looking to put those transactions online and make more and more available online.

"Another initiative is our state's electronic capabilities," he said. "Gov. Joe Manchin says West Virginia is the best kept secret in America. It's probably true because we haven't marketed ourselves to the world."

Schafer said an intern in his office has called every mayor in every county in the state. He's found that of the 247 municipalities, only 19 percent have a Web presence. Fewer than 50 percent of the counties have a Web presence, the intern found.

"So we have an initiative to get at least 75 percent of municipalities and counties to have a Web presence in the next 12 to 18 months," Schafer said.

"Everybody is focusing on broadband, but our three-year strategic plan is a much bigger initiative."

One of Manchin's goals is to make high-speed Internet, also known as broadband, available to all West Virginians by 2010. According to the state Public Service Commission report about advanced services, 77 percent of West Virginia households have access to high-speed Internet service although only 34.6 percent subscribe to

broadband. In comparison, 86 percent of households in the country have access to broadband and 49.6 percent subscribe.

Many observers were surprised in March when Manchin vetoed a bill aimed at increasing broadband availability. The governor said the veto would preserve a new strategic alliance with Cisco Systems, the computer-networking giant headed by Charleston native John Chambers.

Manchin also said the state is working with Verizon to develop a map that shows exactly where broadband is deployed in the state today.

"Moreover, we are aggressively pursuing other alliances with cable providers and hardware and software outfits to further the project," Manchin said.

Schafer said he talked to Manchin before the veto and the key debate was, "Is there anything in that legislation we cannot do without the legislation?" The conclusion was, "we can do it but in a different way," Schafer said. "We can leverage these folks coming to the table such as Cisco and Verizon, to help get us there."

The state only has a verbal agreement with Cisco, "but up to this point they've been very receptive" to helping West Virginia achieve its goals, Schafer said. Cisco has made several of its executives available.

"Most of these folks have a lot of engineering background and most have a background in federal, state or local government," Schafer said. "This team is totally separate and distinct from their sales team. Nothing coming out of this is Cisco-specific or sales oriented or results in a Cisco-specific solution."

Manchin spokeswoman Lara Ramsburg has said Cisco is so far offering its expertise free of charge.

Schafer said Cisco will help the state in three specific areas:

- Educating executive-level state managers "about what we can do as a state to promote technology throughout the state." Schafer said, "They've already come in, met with our cabinet and gone over what other states are doing with e-government."
- Helping the state write its three-year strategic plan.
- Assisting with pre-engineering studies that give the state available options for extending broadband. "We'll take those options and determine how we'll deploy in those areas," Schafer said.

When Cisco presents viable options, one or more of them may be by Cisco. "We'll consider that equally with every other viable option that is out there," Schafer said.

Schafer hopes to have the strategic plan done by the end of the year. The mapping project must be done first, he said. Verizon spokesman Lee Gierczynski said the company has had preliminary discussions with the state although no specifics have been worked out yet.

In his message vetoing the broadband bill, Manchin said the legislation "creates an extensive administrative structure," and that imposing an additional structure on top of the relationships with Cisco, Verizon and others "will likely result in the duplication of efforts, the inefficient allocation of scarce resources, and the introduction of inconsistencies in the still-maturing process that could restrict the growth and progress of the alliances."

The vetoed legislation called for giving a "nonprofit facilitator" a lot of the responsibility for increasing technology use in West Virginia. That sounds a lot like ConnectKentucky, a nonprofit program.

"They are heavily subsidized by the state of Kentucky," Schafer said. "They're taking their (nonprofit status) and offering services to other states. They offered West Virginia a \$2 million unsolicited proposal.

"I think what ConnectKentucky did was, (Chief Executive Officer) Brian Mefford said West Virginia has 55 counties and Kentucky has double that. Their initial startup was \$4 million. West Virginia has half the size. They put a proposal together based on their experience."

Schafer said he doesn't think Manchin ever saw the ConnectKentucky proposal.

One observer who closely watched the vetoed bill was concerned that the legislation didn't create one point of accountability for making sure all of the bill's goals were met.

Now that Manchin has decided to use a strategic alliance to meet its technology goals, Schafer said he and state Commerce Secretary Kelly Goes are jointly accountable. Schafer said he's responsible from the technology deployment perspective and Goes is responsible from the economic development perspective.

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