



Where is Our National Broadband, Senate Asks

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By Chloe Albanesius

Two Democratic FCC commissioners on Wednesday called for a national broadband summit to discuss the U.S. high-speed Internet penetration rate, blaming its slow rollout on a lack of cohesive data and a reliance on marketplace conditions rather than government-sponsored initiatives.

"The mindset that we have ... to work under [at the FCC] is 'don't worry about it, the marketplace will take care of this,'" said FCC Commissioner Michael Copps. "While we all revere the marketplace, there are some things that cannot get done by themselves."

"We have consolidation, lack of competition, ... prices are shooting up, there are no alternatives for small businesses," said Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein. "One way to start is a summit on broadband" that would include the public and private sectors, Congress, the executive branch, agencies like the FCC, he said.

Copps and Adelstein appeared before the Senate Small Business Committee to discuss how improved Internet access would help small businesses. It was convened by Committee Chairman John Kerry, D-Mass., who slammed the White House for not following through on its 2004 pledge to have universal broadband by the end of 2007. "You need tax credits, you need grants, you need the universal service fund," Adelstein said. "You need the FCC to promote incentive policies and opportunities to invest."

President Bush "has yet to put policies in place that will realize this goal," Kerry said.

White House support is of utmost importance, Copps said. "I think a speech from on high saying that this is the infrastructure challenge of the 21st century," he said. "A goal is always welcome, but it has to be accompanied by a strategy and informed tactics."

One of those tactics should be a different regulatory strategy, according to the commissioners. The current regulatory structure is written for a telecom industry ruled by competing Bell telephone companies, a scenario that no longer exists, Copps said.

A major roadblock to a comprehensive overhaul is lack of usable data. "Our current efforts are woefully out-of-date and out-of-whack," Copps said. "We need a more credible definition of speed [than the current 200 kilobits per second for broadband] and more granular measures of deployment, as well as to start gathering data on price and the experience of other nations."

Current FCC broadband maps are "a disgrace," Adelstein said.

He pointed to a small business owner in Chicago who recently mapped the city's broadband coverage using publicly available data providers have on their Web sites. If he can create these maps, "why can't the federal government do it?" Adelstein asked.

Adelstein said FCC Chairman Kevin Martin, who was not present, "is committed to ensuring we get better data."

Data collection and broadband rollout has had some success at the state level with programs like ConnectKentucky and ConnectMaine. Copps acknowledged that the government has probably "federalized too much" in the telecom industry and "taken away authority from the states."

Nonetheless, the federal government should be able to handle data collection, he said. "Getting nationwide data on broadband is a perfectly legitimate exercise for the FCC," Copps said. "It's something we should have done a long time ago."

Adelstein praised cities like Fort Wayne, Ind. for their broadband efforts, "but what does that mean for Gary or South Bend?" he asked. "Can't we have ConnectAmerica?"

Sen. Kerry and the committee's ranking Republican, Olympia Snowe of Maine, voiced support for the broadband summit.

"Each branch of government has to understand exactly what it's going to require through timelines and benchmarks," Snowe said. "There should be a national broadband strategy."

Kerry echoed that sentiment in a recent blog post (<http://www.savetheinternet.com/blog/?p=218>) on FreePress.org.

Kerry also expressed an interest in calling the two Republican FCC commissioners and Chairman Martin before his panel to discuss the topic. An inquiry to Kerry's press office as to whether they had not been invited or simply could not attend Wednesday's hearing was not answered by press time.

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