

## Broadband goal intact, despite veto

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CHARLESTON -- Gov. Joe Manchin still wants all of West Virginia to have high-speed Internet access by 2010, despite vetoing a bill last month aimed at doing just that.

Manchin said the veto will preserve a new "strategic alliance" with high-tech networking powerhouse Cisco Systems. A friendly meeting Manchin had with Cisco CEO and West Virginia native John Chambers has turned into an opportunity for the state to get valuable pointers from the industry leader, according to Manchin.

But that partnership came as news to some of the broadband bill's backers, who hoped to start work on surveying the state's needs and extending high-speed Internet service this year.

The chance to benefit from Cisco's insight -- which the company is so far offering free of charge -- came up late in the legislative session this year, Manchin spokeswoman Lara Ramsburg said.

Now, the company is working with state officials on a three-year plan designed to wire all of West Virginia for broadband service by 2010.

Kyle Schafer, the state's chief technology officer, said the plan will tackle how to build up the infrastructure necessary for broadband, how to get more Internet subscribers connected and how to link schools and homes using the technology.

The state has lagged behind others in developing broadband capabilities, which are seen as essential for certain kinds of economic development.

"West Virginia is 45th in the nation in broadband access," Schafer said. "That's up from 46th last year. But that's still pretty bad."

Last week, the state Public Service Commission reported that about 34.6 percent of West Virginia households have broadband Internet service.

Cisco is not selling a product or competing with current broadband providers, Schafer said, but rather lending its expertise to the state. The company, which has met with cabinet secretaries, will also work on ways of improving the network communications between different state agencies.

The bill that Manchin vetoed would have sought to do much of what Cisco is working to provide. And although the Legislature decided this month that broadband access will be a topic of interim studies, the vetoed bill's chief sponsor is disappointed.

"I'm not really sure why it was vetoed," Sen. John Unger, D-Berkeley, said. "During the session, the governor and his administration were supportive of it."

Unger's bill would have mapped which areas in the state aren't wired for broadband service. Then, in a model similar to the Connect Kentucky program, it would have encouraged nonprofit companies to compete to offer broadband throughout the state. Finally, it would have worked to create demand by connecting homes to broadband Internet use in schools.

Manchin had supported the broadband bill during the session, but the speed with which Cisco offered help took everyone by surprise, Ramsburg said.

"We didn't want to add another layer to something that's already been established and is already starting to work," she said.

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