

Panel urges expanded high-speed access

By ASSOCIATED PRESS

January 9, 2007

CHATTANOOGA — A panel of telecommunication executives and legislators wants high-speed Internet access expanded in Tennessee.

The Tennessee Broadband Task Force decided at a Nashville meeting Monday that rural Tennesseans too often are shut off from access to education, employment and health care services available through high-speed Internet service.

After nearly a year of study, the panel urged the state to follow Kentucky's lead in creating a public-private technology partnership to promote more and better broadband usage.

The term broadband is used to describe high-speed, always-on Internet service. The Federal Communications Commission defines broadband as any service with speeds of at least 200 kilobits per second. The task force said speeds should be quicker than that.

State Sen. Roy Herron, D-Dresden, the panel co-chairman, compared the importance of the information superhighway today to interstate highways in the 1950s.

"This world is being divided between the wired and the fired," Herron said. "There will be those with high-speed broadband lines and those who are in unemployment lines. I'm really, really scared if we don't act."

In a 12-page report to the governor and General Assembly, the broadband task force recommended that the state promote more competition among Internet providers and that a public-private partnership be started to promote more access and usage of broadband technologies.

A study by the Government Accounting Office last May ranked Tennessee 37th in the availability of high-speed Internet.

Kentucky in 2001 created ConnectKentucky. The nonprofit agency developed programs in schools, hospitals and businesses to generate greater access and usage of video and other high-speed Internet services.

From 2004 to 2006, the growth rate of new subscribers to high-speed Internet in Kentucky was the highest in the nation, expanding from 24 percent to 46 percent, according to ConnectKentucky President Brian Mefford.

The Tennessee Broadband Task Force urged the governor and legislature to adopt a program similar to ConnectKentucky.

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