

Pursue broadband access in every part of Tennessee

Today's Topic: Going statewide with broadband

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Our View

One of the arguments being made for expanding high-speed Internet access throughout Tennessee is to liken it to the way the interstate highway system enhanced the state.

But while the highway model is a good analogy, some people point even further back, comparing broadband technology to something as essential as electricity expansion in the 1930s. Broadband availability should become a staple in modern households, as well as businesses and education centers — as fundamental as a telephone, radio or television. For sure, there are people who get by without modern devices, but at least the availability should be certain.

Unfortunately, Tennessee is not completely wired for the greatest levels of Internet service. And that circumstance should be unacceptable. It's not just about convenience. Broadband should no longer be considered a novelty or a luxury — it should be a given.

Fortunately, the Tennessee Broadband Task Force, created in 2005, has been looking at broadband issues in the state and says it's time to ramp up availability. Precisely how that comes about may become a focus of debate, but for now the important point is that Tennessee needs expanded broadband. The state should pursue the goal aggressively.

The task force, co-chaired by Sen. Roy Herron, D-Dresden, and Rep. Mark Maddox, D-Dresden, determined that broadband offers great potential in economic development, education and health care. Any area of the state that does not have broadband access is at a disadvantage. The state should want to widen the field of opportunity.

The task force ran into some resistance in mapping out in detail exactly where the greatest needs exist, because some of the providers of the technology viewed their data as proprietary. But the panel was able to learn enough to know that some rural areas are underserved. It also determined that an excellent model for meeting the challenge can be found in Kentucky, which links public and private interests in a system known as ConnectKentucky. Kentucky has seen broadband availability climb from 60 percent of its households in 2003 to 87 percent by September 2006. Tennessee should capitalize on the Kentucky example.

Part of the challenge for Tennessee is not just identifying potential broadband providers but of convincing providers of the demand in areas that currently lack accessibility. The Tennessee task force says it wants to promote competition to provide service, but competitors might include local governments, not just private providers. Communities like Columbia and Jackson have launched such efforts, and Metro has explored the idea of investing in broadband. Metro Councilman David Briley advocated such a move. A local task force recommended letting private interests carry the ball for now, but the issue should remain on the table.

Competition and the changing nature of the telecommunications industry carry complex facets of their own. But all Tennesseans should agree that full broadband access should be a priority for the state. The task force is right to push for it.

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