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The need for speed

It's hard for Ohio to sink its teeth into the new economy when lack of broadband access forces us to take little bytes Saturday, June 30, 2007

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As a candidate, Ted Strickland professed to understand how important statewide high-speed Internet access is to Ohio's economy. Now, in his sixth month as Ohio's governor, Strickland has learned just how much work it will take to make it happen.

America's abysmal standing relative to other countries - both in terms of access and connection speeds - has been well documented. But a new report details both the nation's lagging condition internationally and the status of individual states. Ohio ranks 40th in download speed, well behind neighbors Illinois (17th) and Michigan (19th), and even behind Kentucky (32nd) and Pennsylvania (33rd).

Why do such measures matter? Because specific applications such as telemedicine and business videoconferencing require higher speeds. Regions that lack fast, reliable connectivity are akin to those without rail or interstate highway access - cut off from the infrastructure required to participate in the modern economy.

So far, Strickland has paid little attention to this once-prominent element of his campaign platform, concentrating instead on other important budget initiatives, notably higher education. Meanwhile, U.S. Rep. Zach Space of Dover has worked aggressively to raise awareness of the need to bring high-speed access to the many underserved areas of southern Ohio.

The group responsible for the report that rates the states, the Communications Workers of America labor organization, supports creation of a national broadband policy. Other countries have adopted such initiatives - typically using a mix of regulatory requirements and incentives - to far outpace the United States' piecemeal approach.

In the absence of broad direction from Washington, forward-thinking states have launched campaigns of their own. Kentucky, for example, has increased broadband availability by 50 percent over the last two years, with 93 percent of all homes now able to access high-speed service. The growth came as a result of a coordinated public-private effort that Gov. Ernie Fletcher spearheaded. Along the way, Kentucky's high-tech job growth rate began outpacing the national average.

Even measuring Ohio's existing needs will be a costly process, to say nothing of developing the infrastructure to meet them. But it is imperative that the state, in conjunction with the private sector, begin to improve upon the state's existing patchwork of programs.

Truly high-speed broadband access is one of the fundamental criteria to compete in the modern economy. Right now, much of Ohio can't even get in the game.

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