

Article: PETE JOHNSON: Information access

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Talk to economic developers across the country and one thing becomes clear: Information technology is as critical to this nation's infrastructure as are highways, electrical grids, water systems and sewer systems. I'm more convinced than ever that broadband deployment must be a key element in the economic revitalization of the 240 counties and parishes the Delta Regional Authority serves.

Advanced information technology applications are necessary to connect Delta residents to the knowledge-based economy. Proper deployment of the technology resources now available will allow us to bring world-class education, health services, employment opportunities and business opportunities to even the smallest communities in our region.

Those who make policy at the local, state and federal levels would never consider preventing people's access to highways. By the same token, we shouldn't hinder access to the information highway.

Last year, the DRA released its landmark iDelta report. The report, which was funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, concluded:

"The economic, educational and health needs of the Delta region are well-documented and well-known. It is simply not possible for the residents of the Delta to live where they live and still compete in an ever more demanding global marketplace without the primary tools necessary for success in that marketplace. Information technology is foremost among those tools. With congressional and presidential mandates to significantly improve conditions in the Delta, the DRA can use the lessons chronicled in iDelta to forever change the expectations and lives of the residents of this great region."

You can read the entire iDelta report by going to our Web site at www.dra.gov. We're working now to find the funding and the partners needed to achieve the report's goals. Those goals include:

Geographic information systems -- Local development districts will use GIS systems to support initiatives in health, transportation, economic development, community development, homeland security and other areas.

Telehealth -- All citizens in rural areas will have access to health care that's augmented by the use of information technology applications. These applications will include basic or specialized clinical services, professional continuing education and improved medical practice management.

Community access -- All residents of the DRA region will have access to broadband Internet in their communities. They also will have the knowledge and training needed to operate in the internet environment.

Awareness -- All residents of the region will become aware of the value of technology to their economic future and the resources available to achieve success.

Distance education -- All schools will have distance education capabilities and trained personnel to manage those operations.

Workforce development -- All adults will have access to training in computer literacy, workforce skills and business practices such as e-commerce and entrepreneurship.

E-government -- All communities will have Internet home pages that provide information and services to their citizens as well as the public outside those communities.

"No single entity is currently organized to implement these recommendations in the Delta," the iDelta report says. "No entity is currently engaged in developing applications, establishing priorities, working with local and state governments to plan for IT transformation in the Delta or coordinating funding among a variety of federal sources. The Delta Regional Authority, however, is ideally suited to play such a role. ... Many reports have documented that information technology, by increasing productivity, is a dominant factor in economic growth. The ever-increasing prominence of technology-driven growth provides a world of opportunities but can be devastating for rural communities such as those found in the Delta. In general, their lack of access and utilization of IT has increased the isolation of rural residents from the vibrant global economy. Absent intervention, this trend is likely to continue for the Delta as the IT-driven world becomes even more competitive."

We're taking the iDelta report and its recommendations seriously. Another recent study by Connected Nation, a non-profit organization, suggests that the country could realize an impact of \$134 billion annually from a modest increase in broadband adoption.

I'm proud to tell you that organizations such as Connected Nation are singling out one of our DRA states -- Kentucky -- as an example of how things should be done. Thanks in part to its ConnectKentucky program, the state has experienced strong growth in the number of households with high-speed broadband service. Kentucky had an 83 percent rate of growth in broadband adoption at a time when the national rate was 57 percent.

A report titled Digital Prosperity, which was issued last year, stated: "In the new global economy, information and communications technology is the major driver, not just of improved quality of life but also of economic growth. Moreover, there are strong indications that IT has the potential to continue driving growth for the foreseeable future. Yet most policymakers do not adequately appreciate this fundamental reality. In fact, after the post-2000 economic dip many concluded incorrectly that the IT economy was smoke and mirrors."

We have excellent examples in our region of organizations that are using information technology to its fullest potential. In the area of telehealth, the University of Tennessee Health Science Center has provided diabetes care and education to hundreds of Delta residents.

In the area of community access, the Connect SI program in southern Illinois is a 20-county economic and community development initiative that seeks to expand the regional economy through broadband connectivity. Southern Illinois University anchors Connect SI by providing technical, educational and management resources.

In the area of distance learning, the ACCESS distance learning initiative in Alabama uses telecommunications to provide opportunities for high school students to take advanced placement courses.

In the area of workforce development, the Information Commons at Southeast Missouri State University at Cape Girardeau provides technical support, state-of-the-art computers, software, media production equipment and more. It serves as a place where students can continue learning outside the classroom in a collaborative, comfortable and inviting atmosphere.

In the area of e-government, ConnectKentucky's leadership teams determine ways that broadband deployment can provide better government services. They then identify applications and assist in the development of infrastructure to further support the initiative.

We must build on programs such as these to truly advance this region. We have no choice if we're to compete in the economy of the new century. A wave of information technology investment is as necessary as great highway construction projects.

Pete Johnson of Clarksdale, Miss., is the federal co-chairman of the Delta Regional Authority. The following Alabama counties are part of the authority: Barbour, Choctaw, Dallas, Hale, Marengo, Pickens, Washington, Bullock, Clarke, Escambia, Lowndes, Monroe, Russell, Wilcox, Butler, Conecuh, Greene, Macon, Perry and Sumter.