

THE WINCHESTER SUN



Wednesday February 20, 2008

http://www.winchestersun.com/public_html/?module=displaystory&story_id=11263&format=html

Building on a strong tech foundation

by Rene F. True

As executive director of ConnectKentucky, I am proud of Kentucky's accomplishments in technology deployment in the past three years.

In 2004, ConnectKentucky spearheaded a statewide project to establish a firm technology foundation in Kentucky. Today, Kentucky boasts unqualified success, and the nation is taking note.

The ConnectKentucky model for broadband and technology expansion has garnered national media attention from The Economist, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post. The model also spurred national legislation, innovative programs and a new outlook for Kentucky's future.

Kentucky's strong foundation is composed of many successes:

- Broadband availability increased from 60 percent to 95 percent, representing about 546,000 new households.
- Home computer ownership in Kentucky has increased from 58 percent to 72 percent. That growth rate is about three times faster than the national average.
- All Kentucky counties have technology plans or programs and each has a local government Web site.
- 18,400 new Kentucky information technology (IT) jobs have been created.
- Kentucky is recognized as the national leader in technology acceleration and repeatedly acknowledged as the national model for states.
- More than \$743 million of private capital has been invested in Kentucky telecommunications.

And with this firm technology foundation, the question now becomes "What will we do with it?"

ConnectKentucky's focus in the coming years will shift from the foundation of technology to building demand for broadband and technology by encouraging meaningful applications. With available technology, unforeseen opportunities are within reach.

Imagine better health care at a fraction of the cost, education that prepares children for the world as well as the Bluegrass, jobs that keep rural Kentuckians and their children in their hometowns and a competitive edge that attracts high-tech jobs to replace disappearing traditional low-skilled jobs.

ConnectKentucky will continue to develop innovative programs encouraging private investment in broadband infrastructure. In order to keep pace with the global economy, Kentucky must ensure its telecommunications infrastructure is robust and healthy. This requires that Kentucky address broadband speed and capacity gaps. ConnectKentucky's model will cultivate fertile ground on which to leverage technology growth and adoption, including the following initiatives:

- ConnectKentucky will identify and promote "wireless hotspots" across the commonwealth by providing a one-stop, interactive GIS map of "wireless hotspots" so Kentuckians can remain connected at all times.
- ConnectKentucky plans an aggressive research agenda to retain Kentucky's reputation for innovative policy that touches every Kentuckian.
- County-level strategic technology plans will be implemented as part of the ongoing work of the e-community leadership teams established in each of Kentucky's 120 counties.
- ConnectKentucky will work statewide to ensure that businesses are aware of the advantages of e-business strategies and appropriately planning and implementing the most relevant technology solutions.
- Although home computer ownership has increased, ConnectKentucky exasperates all efforts to see that households who can still not afford the necessary hardware and broadband connection through programs like No Child Left Offline.
- Support the adaptation of the Kentucky workforce to Kentucky's changing economic climate in order to remain competitive globally.
- ConnectKentucky supports Kentucky's rural communities by encouraging the expansion of telework, a cost effective work situation that boosts Kentucky's economy and create efficient operations.

Yes, much has been accomplished since ConnectKentucky began work on Kentucky's technology foundation, but much remains to be done.

The accomplishments of yesterday will not be enough to move Kentucky forward tomorrow without continued investment.

As a state, we must continue to build on technology investments and fund technology advancements like these initiatives so that we can ensure Kentucky remains the place of choice to live, work, and raise a family.

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