Rural Missouri lags in broadband access

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By Sam Blackwell ~ Southeast Missourian

Providing universal access to broadband capability has been compared to driving the golden spike that completed America's transcontinental railroad in 1869. Though the higher cost may deny access to some, high-speed Internet technology is available to most people who live in urban areas. But rural America remains on the frontier that separates many of those who live there from the rest of the world.

"Certain people are definitely treated in a lower class than in other communities," said Robert M. Clayton III, a member of the Missouri Public Service Commission.

By mid-2008, some Southeast Missouri communities that have had to get by without broadband are expected to get DSL service from AT&T, according to Marsha Haskell, the company's regional director for external affairs. The communities due to receive DSL service within a year are Oak Ridge, Bell City, Benton, Delta, Deering, Essex, Fisk, Altenburg-Frohna, Holcomb, Hornersville, Morehouse, Old Appleton, Patton, Wappapello, Qulin, Risco, St. Mary's, Wardell and Wyatt.

Last month, PSC member Clayton and former PSC commissioner Steve Gaw released a study showing that one in five Missouri households doesn't have access to broadband technology. Kentucky, the state considered the model for broadband connectivity, has an estimated 90 percent coverage.

Many but not all of those Missouri households are in rural areas, where the expansion of broadband systems has lagged because of the lack of financial incentive. Four-hundred-twenty-two telephone exchange areas have no cable broadband, and 128 have no DSL, high-speed Internet access available over phone lines. Ninety-one of the 689 telephone exchange areas in Missouri have neither cable nor DSL broadband access.

Some suburban areas also are going unserved because they are more than 18,000 feet from the central office of their telephone company, the limit of DSL reach.

The rural broadband study recommended making a state agency responsible for collecting data on broadband deployment and making broadband access a priority in the state by providing regulatory or tax incentives.

'Tight time frame'

Last week, Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt announced he will appoint a task force to help expand rural access to broadband technology. Lt. Gov. Peter Kinder will be the chairman. The 16 members

will include representatives from small business, education, government, the Missouri Farm Bureau and the director of the Missouri Department of Economic Development.

The task force has a mandate to produce a report by Feb. 1. "We have a tight time frame," Kinder said.

This week, a staffer or two from his office will attend a seminar on rural broadband access being led by Illinois Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn in Springfield.

"Access to high-speed Internet service is a keystone for economic development in the 21st century," Kinder said. "It is vital for our schools in rural areas and small-town schools to have access to high-speed Internet as most urban and suburban schools do. We want the same advantages for them."

Kinder said broadband also is vital for farmers and ranchers to compete in global agricultural markets.

"We don't want there to be these gaps that exist right now."

Clayton said the lack of broadband capability limits a community's opportunities for business -- both commercial and personal -- education and recreation. Dial-up also potentially subjects people to higher costs, he said, citing the example of having to buy airline tickets by phone rather than spending an hour online.

He hopes the study helps create a consensus about the importance of broadband, "that all persons in a society should have equal access. How we get there is another question," he said.

Oak Ridge is one of the Missouri communities that lacks DSL or broadband capability by cable. Fran England, the town treasurer, says the unavailability of broadband is not an issue that has come before the town board. She uses a dial-up service she calls "awfully slow. It takes forever to get anything."

The Rev. Jon Sedgwick of the First Baptist Church of Oak Ridge brought broadband into his home through INetPlus, a Perry County company that provides broadband access through five towers positioned around the county. He is close enough to be served by the tower at Pocahontas.

Sedgwick sought out a broadband service because his wife is a medical transcriptionist who works at home and because they have three teenage children. "There is a phone hub a block away from where we live," Sedgwick said. "We continued to call Southwestern Bell and continued to get the runaround."

The cost is $34.95 a month plus $485 for the peanut-shaped receiver and equipment and $99 for installation. Sedgwick said the quality is as good as any high-speed Internet service he has used and is better than a satellite service because it is not affected by weather.

Broadband can be delivered in a variety of ways. Cable and DSL are the most common. Fixed wireless, known as Wi-Fi, sends and receives Internet signal between an antenna and the customer's antenna. Fiber optics can combine telephone and video to the home by a bidirectional fiber optic strand. A dedicated circuit is often used by industry and schools such as

Oak Ridge's to provide broadband. Satellite delivers Internet signals between a satellite orbiting the earth and the customer. These systems have longer delay times than others.

The study did not gauge satellite broadband use in the state.

It found that communities lacking any broadband access tend to be served by the largest phone carriers. "The large companies didn't do well." Most of the small rural phone companies provided 80 percent coverage.

The not-for-profit Rural Broadband Coalition maintains that broadband is as essential as any other utility. Some communities have succeeded in building Wi-Fi systems by treating them as a utility.

Clayton, the PSC member, said he is not advocating that step. "In the circles where I operate, I don't want to create that stir without first establishing a consensus that broadband is important," he said.

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