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Guest columns

ALABAMA VOICES: Close technology gap

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By Gerald Dial and Kathy Johnson

Alabama is enjoying the most drastic evolution in economic development in the history of the state. The unemployment rate is at 3.3 percent. The time has come for Alabama to lay a foundation for continued success.

With this in mind, let's look at some statistics. Alabama presently ranks 43rd in the nation in PC ownership and 44th in Internet access. In order for all areas of the state to participate in and reap benefits from the robust economic growth, it is imperative that broadband, also known as high-speed, Internet access be made available to all citizens of Alabama in every corner of the state. There is an ever growing gap between our citizens who have technology and those who do not.

The reasons for this are many. First, technology can break down the barriers of distance allowing rural residents to participate more fully in economic and civic life. Our farmers need broadband for monitoring weather and crop reports and for more rapid access to parts, feed and seed supplies.

Broadband allows rural communities to attract businesses and individuals that would not be able to live and work in rural communities otherwise. Broadband also opens up education and health care opportunities to rural communities that have functioned as barriers to economic development in the past.

Gov. Riley has been the leading advocate for ACCESS, (Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide), which connects all schools in Alabama with virtual classrooms. This program has been very successful in improving education in the rural communities of the state and has become a model for other states.

Another example of excellent programs available via broadband is telemedicine. High-speed interactive broadband with instantaneous communication between health professionals and patients enables remote monitoring, effective chronic disease management and more effective response to emergencies. High-speed broadband augments current medical services by using technology to make health care more accessible, cost effective and flexible.

This modern, high-technology network is being rapidly constructed, but we face tough challenges in ensuring that these benefits flow not only to those who can afford the most advanced network service, but to all residents of Alabama, regardless of income or location.

Congress now has several efforts under way to launch a national initiative that will duplicate the nation-leading technology success realized in Kentucky. The Kentucky effort, known as ConnectKentucky, was implemented by Kentucky Gov. Ernie Fletcher following a charge by

President Bush to expand broadband to rural America. ConnectKentucky brought together their most innovative educational entities, businesses and public agencies to coordinate a turnaround in technology for their state.

As was so well stated by Gov. Fletcher at his launch of ConnectKentucky, "Although broadband infrastructure on its own is not a silver bullet solution for prosperity, adequate access to broadband technology is an enabler for knowledge-based economic development and enhancing the lives of citizens and businesses. Broadband Internet access enables enhanced education, healthcare delivery, government services, entertainment and entrepreneurship."

Among several pieces of federal legislation and recommendations by such agencies as the Federal Communications Commission, the bipartisan Connect the Nation Act of 2007 was recently filed by Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., to encourage the rapid deployment of affordable broadband Internet service, particularly in rural areas. The legislation supports a grant program that would enable states to implement an initiative similar to ConnectKentucky, a public-private partnership leading efforts to accelerate broadband availability and technology literacy.

The developments in Congress come amidst nationwide efforts to highlight the importance of technology and innovation in regard to America's ability to compete in the global economy. The week of May 14-18 was proclaimed by the National Governor's Association as Innovation America week -- a time in which governors encouraged innovation by focusing on the importance of providing a quality math and science education, helping colleges and universities better prepare the workers of tomorrow and promoting investment in the businesses and technologies of the future.

Alabama hopes to follow in the footsteps of our sister state. We are much the same in size, population and presence of rural communities as Kentucky, and believe we have the same opportunity for technology advancement. A group of Alabama's leaders met recently to review the Connected Nation and ConnectKentucky model, to learn of a mapping effort that is under way to identify and map broadband gaps in the state, a new health care broadband initiative, funding opportunities for broadband expansion and to discuss next steps. An advisory committee was formed and, as the project moves forward, communities across the state will have opportunities to join the effort.

The committee will work toward strategic technology expansion across Health care; K-12 education; higher education; business and industry; agriculture; libraries; community-based organizations; tourism, recreation and parks; and government. We must take the necessary steps to ensure availability, awareness, application, affordability and adoption of broadband for all of Alabama.

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