

Closing the digital divide in South Carolina

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Times change. At one time, rural South Carolina welcomed into its homes the long-awaited delivery of telephone lines and electricity. Today, much of rural South Carolina finds itself once again cut-off from the modern world as access to broadband connectivity is predominately limited to more densely populated areas – for city folk.

Broadband, as defined by the International Telecommunication Union, is “the capacity to transmit large quantities of electronic signals (including data, video, text, and voice) rapidly.” A recent Penn State report, “Broadband Internet Service in Rural and Urban Pennsylvania: A Common Wealth or Digital Divide,” suggests that while there is no industry consensus on any precise range of speed that would qualify as broadband, cable modem, DSL, wireless, and satellite Internet technologies have become synonymous with the term broadband. Furthermore, these technologies generally allow users to connect to the Internet at speeds 5-10 times, if not a few hundred times, faster than a dial-up connection.

More and more, our educational, medical, and business worlds demand enhanced technological capabilities. Large, detailed files can only be transmitted efficiently and effectively over broadband. In business, time is money; files must be transmitted and downloaded quickly, and capabilities like video conferencing and video streaming are increasingly required. Only a broadband connection can cater to these needs. Dial-up is no longer a viable option.

There are large portions of Kershaw County that do not have broadband access. Many of the people that live in these areas can afford to pay the monthly service fee; however, the communications companies have decided that it is not cost effective to lay the infrastructure in low density population areas, or what is termed “The Last Mile.” This limitation to the expansion of wireline connectivity means that the state should explore other possibilities to address the need for all of South Carolina to have access to broadband.

Increasingly consumers are trending towards wireless options such as wireless phones (which can do almost anything a computer can do) and wireless Internet access. For businesses, in particular, wireless Internet access provides flexibility, increases worker productivity, and cuts the cost of wiring offices. For optimal results, South Carolina should look for wireless options to advance our technological capabilities to compete in the 21st century.

South Carolina has too long suffered from gross disparities in communities’ resources and opportunities based on incomes or geographic locations. Rural areas, which are already disadvantaged socially and economically, stand to fall further behind if they are not fully included in the technological revolution.

Access to technology is a key component to building wealth in our communities. Broadband in rural areas can help develop and sustain rural businesses, be instrumental in attracting new businesses and industries to rural areas, and provide enhanced educational opportunities. Every Kershaw County high school student could have access to the Internet on their laptop from home, not just students of families who are lucky enough to have access to and can afford the service. With broadband, rural communities can be more dynamic by supporting entrepreneurial activity and telecommuters who want to live in rural areas.

South Carolina needs to set a goal of providing universal access in this state to adequate broadband services. As events unfold this next session, an opportunity may arise to accomplish this through the utilization of excess spectrum that has become available through South Carolina Education Television (ETV). This taxpayer asset can be leased by the state to business partners who could provide wireless Internet activity throughout the state. For more information on this plan, visit http://www.myetv.org/about_etv/ebs.

Imagine South Carolina as one big “hotspot.” This exciting concept can be reality if our state and its leaders are committed to full technological opportunities for everyone, no matter your income or your geographic location. A statewide broadband initiative is a critical step in creating a South Carolina equipped to reach its full potential.