

Lack of Broadband Narrows Opportunities for Rural Communities

The recession has motivated many people to use the Internet for job searches and professional networking. The majority of those benefiting from online resources as they search for a job are predominantly located in urban and suburban areas, where fast broadband internet access is available. Unfortunately, much of rural North Carolina is still without broadband access. The competitiveness of our state depends on access to information, no matter where they live.

In January, North Carolina's unemployment rate reached a 26-year high of 9.7 percent unemployment and that number continues to climb. More than half of the state's unemployed live in rural counties: of the 17 counties with unemployment rates at 10 percent or higher, 16 are rural.

Further exacerbating the job shortage in rural North Carolina is the economic transition from manufacturing to services and technology. According to the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, over the last year more than 75 percent of job losses in manufacturing came from the state's 85 rural counties.

These are troublesome indicators and they require unprecedented and innovative responses. Fortunately, when resources are thin and pressures are mounting, this can create the best incentive for people to come together, debate new ideas, and find innovative solutions.

One solution is to focus on North Carolina's broadband infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. Broadband is quickly becoming a staple service. Just like we need roads to connect us to our schools, businesses, and social outlets, we need broadband to connect us to rich information, jobs, and the ability to communicate.

According to the North Carolina Rural Internet Access Authority's 2007 report, only 83 percent of North Carolina households have access to broadband, DSL, or cable services. There are approximately 600,000 households in this state without access to any form of Internet. The situation is worse in our rural counties with approximately 1.5 million rural residents devoid of "high-speed" broadband access.

Providing broadband services to rural communities can create jobs. It produces opportunities for home-based businesses and telecommuting. In order for any community to remain competitive, attractive, and thriving, broadband Internet access must be a priority.

Broadband access becomes even more vital in the recovery from the recession. Small, rural towns are struggling to keep residents and businesses in their communities, in part because of the lack of broadband access. Unfortunately rural areas, small cities, and even some large cities cannot afford broadband development.

Rural communities cannot afford to wait on the feds or the state to develop and implement broadband solutions, as they risk being left further behind, widening the digital divide. Under the stimulus bill, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act less than 1 percent of the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program will go towards funding broadband service expansion in the nation's rural areas. Considering the declining resources in our state budget, it is unlikely that there will be enough resources to make a difference in broadband development.

While the situation seems hopeless, there are some success stories: Tryon, North Carolina. Tryon, a remote, rural community was turned down by private Internet providers for broadband expansion. Instead of giving up, Tryon officials chose to create a faster Internet service themselves, by providing a fiber optic network for their schools, businesses, and residents.

Tryon and Polk County applied for a grant and successfully created their own seven-mile fiber optic network from downtown Tryon to neighboring Columbus. They established their customer base by ensuring that government offices, schools, and businesses became customers. Tryon's

success in its broadband strategy was critical to economic development, allowing them to compete with communities around the world.

When the private sector fails to provide a needed service, rural communities like Tryon and Columbus must proactively pursue their own resources for funding and expanding broadband services. If rural leaders do not take the initiative and invest the time, resources, and energy, they will be left behind.

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