



Community Connection

The Knight Center of Digital Excellence Newsletter

Jan. 27, 2009



Getting up to speed takes a strong plan



By Mark T. Ansbury, the Knight Center of Digital Excellence

So we need new jobs? To understand what a fully developed, mega-speed communications system can do for our economy, think of what an Interstate highway system did for commerce in the 1950s. Today, leadership in building out an “Internet highway” could create jobs now and for decades to come.

Americans are poorer than they were a year ago. Unemployment is about 8 percent and climbing. Numerous reports, including one from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), show the United States falling to 15th among developed countries in high-speed Internet penetration.

As President-Elect Barack Obama recognizes, technology and broadband can be a means to stimulate the economy, put many Americans back to work and help us reclaim a position of world leadership through the development of broadband networks that enable high-speed communications throughout our nation.

In a recent speech, Obama held out a vision of the future in which every child has Internet access, and all schools and libraries have the technological resources necessary to prepare tomorrow’s work force for high-skilled, well-paying jobs.

High-level research and main street anecdotes support his assumptions and demonstrate that broadband access and utilization will increase construction jobs and employment across multiple industries including government, manufacturing, finance, education, health care, information services and new industries yet to be identified. The new administration recognizes that broadband will create jobs for today and will have a multiplier effect that will create new jobs for years to come.

Ben Scott, policy director of the media reform group Free Press, drew the comparison of an Internet highway being on par with the building of Interstate highways under the Eisenhower Administration. As with the Interstate highways, government has a role in defining national goals, and in allocating federal money that must then be spent wisely.

While definitions vary, our view of broadband relates to how much information can be transferred via the Internet, at what speed and where it can be sent and received.

Our nation's major communication providers suggest that, as part of an economic stimulus package, tens of billions of dollars should go toward expanding their DSL and cable modem services in underserved urban and rural communities. Furthermore, these same providers believe DSL is broadband. Would this be a wise investment? We think not. DSL is approaching obsolescence, providing on average just 1.5 to 10 Mbps, compared to South Korea's nearly 100 Mbps average nationwide. Other nations such as Japan are pushing an average of 1 Gbps.

Our broadband investment must be stewarded by communities, working in public-private partnerships, to ensure that we are not squandering limited resources on yesterday's technologies. Our goal should be nothing short of radical advancement in the way we do business, educate our children, care for our sick, and in the very way we carry out our daily lives. Imagine a doctor in rural Mississippi using a wireless camera system to get biopsy results from a leading metropolitan hospital. Or think of students in a biology class zooming in, via camera, to real-time work in top-notch laboratories. Broadband is essential for future innovation across all industry and consumer sectors.

The leading Asian and European nations are investing heavily in next-generation fiber and wireless technologies, providing higher quality capacity and services at significantly lower costs. Government, education and health organizations are driving adoption while new industries are emerging and creating jobs. If the United States is to remain competitive in the emerging knowledge-based global economy, it must do the same and our efforts must be fruitful. We cannot afford to squander limited resources on yesterday's technologies.

For Americans, the goal of technological and broadband leadership is larger than anything that can be delivered in a simple package, or by a single industry.

What is needed is a cohesive call to action for shovel-ready broadband projects that leverage existing state, county, municipal, regional and community broadband programs. For state and local governments, regional competitiveness depends on the ability to implement proactive measures that produce desired results.

As a first step we need to understand specifically the kind of efforts that will lead to the most effective and most immediate results. We need a road map, in essence. Smart spending choices can only be made within the context of clear goals, so that states and local governments know what to do to meet the needs of their communities, industries and citizens. This is the call to action we need, to ensure that our future work force can compete on a global scale.

Our federal, state, county and municipal governments, along with our schools and health care providers among others, are already heavy investors in broadband networks and are helping to carve out a new future through technology. We cannot miss this opportunity to excel as a nation, by achieving the greatest capacity, and the highest quality of high-speed Internet access, through the most cost-effective means.

The Knight Center of Digital Excellence is working with many of our nation's leaders and has been able to demonstrate the impact of public-private partnerships to better leverage limited funds while avoiding unnecessary duplication. Working within the framework of public-private partnerships, our nation will be able to align broadband infrastructure deployments with the top priorities of communities.

The good news is that in our highly intelligent nation, we have many informed voices to help develop the framework for a national vision of excellence, so stimulus money can be well directed. We hope that President-Elect Obama's strategy does not give the incumbent telecommunications providers unadulterated access to funds to extend stale DSL technologies. We hope that our national policy and stimulus strategy will consider a more thoughtful approach that involves widespread participation. A comprehensive broadband strategy should strengthen our telecommunications industry, encourage investment and increase the quality, capacity and services for our communities for decades to come.

It will be up to the next administration to develop a comprehensive plan for building an infrastructure that addresses the immediate need for jobs while also addressing the technology needs of the nation with the same good foresight as the Interstate highway system of Eisenhower's time.

Our goal at the Knight Center of Digital Excellence is to contribute to the discussion, especially through our work in creating digital connectivity in 26 cities throughout the United States through a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. We believe it is essential for communities to be well-informed stakeholders as they attempt to direct investments that will be critical to our broadband future, and critical to our economic future.

Only by grasping the great potential down the road can we grasp the importance of the immediate work ahead.

Mark T. Ansbury is Chief Technology Officer the Knight Center of Digital Excellence based in Akron, Ohio. To learn more about the Knight Center, go to www.knightcenter.org or e-mail info@knightcenter.org.