



Community Connection

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The case for open broadband infrastructure



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

If America is about to spend nearly \$7 billion on building a new pipeline for Internet access, then we should clearly understand the spending choices we're about to make.

A place to start is by drawing a comparison to our national network of delivering gas and electricity to consumers. Imagine if federal regulation were so lenient that competing companies in the same community each built their own separate grids and pipelines to deliver these essential utilities. Everyone would pay more for gas and electricity in order to finance the high cost of excess infrastructure. In the case of gas and electricity, America has one complex grid and pipeline system to serve everyone. Multiple providers each tap into the same system.

Today, it's the opposite in the case of broadband networks. Communications companies such as AT&T, Sprint, Verizon and cable operators such as Time Warner, Comcast and Cox each invest in their own separate networks. And who pays for this duplication of expense? You do, as a consumer and a taxpayer, whether you're paying for your own Internet service or for service to your schools, hospitals, libraries, public safety forces and government offices. Making matters worse, the high cost of building a broadband network acts as a barrier to new competitors entering the market.

The stimulus bill does not require an open broad network that is shared and accessible to new providers. However, the plan does make a start in the right direction. About 75 percent of the \$7 billion proposed allocation for broadband infrastructure would go to the underserved in rural communities. State and local governments, nonprofits and commercial providers would compete for this money to finance new open networks.

Yet far more is needed. Beyond this first step, the Federal Communications Commission must establish policy to determine how existing privately owned networks can become part of a common system.

Opponents to an open infrastructure argue that tax incentives would be a cheaper option. That is true in the sense that Internet service carriers would receive tax breaks to expand their current infrastructure, in place of new spending. Yet the shortsightedness of this approach would only perpetuate the current fragmented system that drains resources by duplicating efforts. The current plan does not include tax incentives, but you can be sure there will be ongoing efforts to create tax breaks, essentially to perpetuate the current flawed system.

Our federal leaders must resist the pressure and instead continue on the path of open broadband infrastructure. Ultimately, open Internet access will result in job growth while transforming the very way we live and work. It will enable police and fire forces to develop new procedures to communicate directly with people in distress. It will allow doctors anywhere in the United States to send complex medical images to leading specialists who can offer advice. It will let students learn through virtual experiences. Imagine advanced science students tuning in live, with two-way communications, to events such as open-heart surgeries and real-time scientific experimentation.

Right now, our international counterparts are incorporating the best technology has to offer to encourage and advance creative education. We as Americans built our great nation with intelligent foresight that relied on learning and innovation. Now we must rise to this new challenge, and we must be willing to invest new money on new initiatives that benefit the common good.

Today, with jobs, the economy and American competitiveness at stake, we must meet the challenge to build a new transportation system to carry information - and America - through the 21st century.

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