

Rural broadband access still spotty

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By Matt Sanders ~ Southeast Missourian

In Southeast Missouri and rural areas across the United States, many people have been left behind in the advance to high speed Internet access across the nation.

Rural areas and communities without broadband find it hard to attract business and middle- to upper-class workers who telecommute. But the scope of the problem is difficult to measure with the current system in place to track where broadband access is and is not available.

"One of the frustrating aspects of trying to push broadband where it's not, is you don't always know. There's not a comprehensive list," said Claiborn Crain, assistant to the administrator of the USDA's Rural Development Utilities Program. Since 2002, USDA Rural Development has administered a program that gives loans to broadband Internet service providers to install service in unserved or underserved rural areas.

That program recently came under fire from members of Congress, including U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., after it was found that the program was giving loans to companies to install broadband networks in communities that weren't rural. The USDA implemented new rules last week to address the problem.

The difficulty in tracking who has broadband and who doesn't lies with the reporting system. The FCC asks broadband providers to report which area codes in which they serve at least one customer. A ZIP code that has three providers giving service to one customer each would show in the FCC data that three companies serve the area, even if they only serve a few homes.

In those areas that don't, attracting new people with good incomes becomes difficult, said Scott Lindsay, president of the Rural Broadband Coalition, a not-for-profit group that advocates for increased access in rural areas.

"People do locate specifically because they have broadband access," said Lindsay, who adds that the availability of Internet access is a common question potential homebuyers ask realtors.

Many small towns and rural areas are left behind because they lack the capital to make infrastructure improvements to install high-speed data lines and companies often don't want to invest in the technology in low-population areas, Lindsay said.

Broadband Internet access is commonplace in most incorporated areas of Southeast Missouri and may become more commonplace after AT&T recently announced plans to expand its broadband service to more areas across the state at a cost of \$335 million. Nine companies provide service in Cape Girardeau and Perryville, eight in Jackson, seven in Scott City and six in Marble Hill, according to the FCC.

But many unincorporated towns and rural areas are without service, or customers have very few options. Daisy in Cape Girardeau County, Gipsy in Bollinger County and McGee in Wayne County are three Southeast Missouri towns the FCC lists as having no high-speed ISPs. In some Southeast Missouri communities -- Jackson, Poplar Bluff, Qulin, Fisk, Dudley, Puxico, among others -- companies have applications for USDA broadband loans approved, and others -- Advance, Bell City, East Prairie, Whitewater, Glenallen, Sedgewickville, among others -- have loan applications pending.

Scott County Developer Joel Evans felt the effects of the broadband deficit in rural areas when he moved to Southeast Missouri. Evans' wife works in sales, and her job requires that she have broadband access. Evans said the couple wanted to build a home in rural Scott County, but the areas where they wanted to build had no access.

"Instead, we bought a home in Sikeston," Evans said.

Evans said he hasn't mapped where coverage is available, but many unincorporated areas of the county that aren't near main transportation routes are without service, he said. In his position as the county's chief economic development officer, Evans said the problem is one that concerns him, so he tries to keep track of companies' plans to install high-speed access in areas of Scott County.

"It's beginning to be a problem in rural areas, and I think will be a more of a problem in the future," Evans said.

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