

STATE POLITICS: IDAHO

Bill Underway to Develop Idaho Broadband Network

By Sharon Fisher, 2-19-08

An education bill passed out of committee on Monday is intended to provide high-speed Internet access throughout Idaho, including currently underserved areas, and eventually to provide such access to industry and to state government itself.

There has been some dispute over the past couple of years regarding how many people in Idaho lack high-speed Internet access. U.S. West (Qwest) has indicated that it believes that a majority of the people in Idaho who want such high-speed connections have access if they want it, but some people have disagreed, saying they want it but can't get it – and that Qwest has stymied efforts by other companies to provide it.

Without high-speed access, it is difficult or impossible to use web-based browsers, let alone have access to downloadable video or music. In addition to consumer use, this not only affects the ability of companies in those areas to do business, but also the ability of students to use the Internet for research – which is where the Education committee comes in.

On Monday, Representative Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d'Alene, chair of the House education committee, presented RS 17910C1 to the committee, which upon passage from the committee becomes known as H543.

According to the text of the bill, the Department of Administration is charged with coordinating the development, outsourcing and implementation of a statewide network for education, including connectivity of a bandwidth high enough to support two-way interactive video and consisting primarily of fiber optic transmission media. The first step is for the department to develop a map of currently underserved areas.

In addition, "Idaho will leverage its statewide purchasing power for the IEN to promote private sector investment in telecommunications infrastructure that will benefit other technology applications such as telemedicine, telecommuting, telegovernment and economic development," the bill reads. Statewide economic development impacts are specifically to be considered in the network's implementation and development. In a later phase, Idaho state agencies are intended to be migrated to the network as well.

The presenting issue of the legislation is to develop an "Idaho Education Network," similar to the Utah Education Network, and to create a place for funds to develop such a network, though such funds are not likely to be available this year due to a drop in revenues, Nonini reportedly told the committee. The committee, on a motion by Representative Branden Durst, D-Boise, agreed to print the bill, which is the first step in the process of becoming a law.

The bill is co-sponsored by 15 Representatives and seven Senators, as well as Governor Butch Otter's good buddy Director of Administration Mike Gwartney and Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna.

Having a definitive map of Internet access would be a good start, but several questions remain to be answered about the legislation, should it pass the House and Senate education committees, House, the Senate, and receive Governor Otter's signature.

o How will the Department of Administration identify these areas? Will it rely on the word of Qwest and other providers about where Internet access is available, or will it go out and look on its own?

o How granular will the map be? For example, some areas may have access to Internet or not, depending on line-of-sight to a transmitter. Will the map be based simply on whether the majority of people in a county or city have access, or might it be down to the block level? Will the map note what speeds and what Internet communications methods are available in a particular area, or will low-speed Internet access via satellite look the same as a pipe fat enough to download three movies simultaneously?

o How will the Department of Administration define “broadband”? According to the Federal Communications Commission, “broadband” can be as little as 200 k bits per second – a speed that does not permit a number of common Internet applications.

o Once the map is completed, then what? Qwest has indicated in the past that it *doesn't intend to provide broadband Internet* to any more unserved areas unless the state pays for it, because it believes the people in those areas either don't want high-speed Internet or can't afford it even if they do. If the state is intending to use high-speed Internet as a basis for education, how will it then take upon itself the responsibility to make sure all Idaho citizens have access to it? If it gives Qwest more money, will it do a better job of overseeing the process to ensure that the money is actually spent on underserved areas, as opposed to its \$5 million investment in 2006?