

# **SPEAKOUT: Broadband For All**

## **State's Economic Health Depends On Faster Rollout**

By Phil Weiser

April 11, 2008

Over the course of the 2008 presidential campaign, candidates will discuss a variety of issues critical to our economy and national competitiveness. One issue, however, remains conspicuously off the radar screen: how the federal government, states and localities should address the development of broadband Internet access.

By all accounts, broadband is the fastest growing consumer electronics technology in U.S. history. Nonetheless, other countries have enjoyed faster growth in their adoption of broadband, spurring concerns that the U.S. is losing its status as a leader in the Internet age. There are a number of reasons why the international comparisons are questionable, but those reasons do not justify the lack of federal policy leadership in this area.

Access to broadband is already, just a decade after its introduction, the most critical gateway technology to the information age. The ways in which people work, create companies, learn and access entertainment are forever changed by this technology. And the broadband revolution is just getting started. Consider, for example, that the ability of broadband technology to facilitate dramatic improvements in available educational offerings and health-care delivery is only beginning to be developed. In part because some of these opportunities have yet to emerge, the pace and nature of broadband deployment are often ignored or underappreciated by policy-makers at all levels of government.

As many have observed, the Bush administration has largely failed to develop any framework for broadband policy. This policy of benign neglect is most unfortunate because broadband is not just like any consumer electronics technology. Rather, it provides a crucial platform for delivering education (bringing advanced courses into every home and school), providing health care (allowing doctors to offer diagnoses at a distance), and driving economic development (enabling Internet-based businesses to be located anywhere).

Thankfully, Gov. Bill Ritter recognized the importance of broadband deployment in his Colorado Promise, calling for the development of a Broadband Infrastructure Task Force to develop a strategy for addressing the issue. This task force is now up and running as a part of the Governor's Innovation Council.

The first step to spurring the deployment and adoption of broadband connections throughout a state is to map the presence of broadband, following the old maxim of “you can’t manage what you can’t measure.” To that end, Sen. Gail Schwartz, D-Snowmass Village, has introduced Senate Bill 215, which, if enacted, will call on the state’s chief information officer, working with the council, to engage in such a mapping effort in Colorado.

This important step would inform established and upstart broadband providers of where there are opportunities to extend service and would form the basis for developing any appropriate government programs to encourage the rollout of broadband to unserved areas. In short, this initiative would enable the state to focus its efforts to champion the deployment and adoption of broadband technology in those areas that have yet to do so.

In theory, broadband technology will enable more remote areas to overcome many of the challenges they have historically faced - getting access to top-flight teachers for their students; gaining access to enhanced health-care services; enabling companies to locate there and be a seamless part of modern commerce; and affording access to top-flight cultural and entertainment opportunities.

In a cruel irony, however, the areas that can often benefit most from broadband are often those without access to such connections. To be sure, Colorado and the U.S. government could take the view that the technology will roll out to those areas eventually and thus a policy of benign neglect is the right one. In my view, however, allowing another three or five or seven years to lapse before deciding to take action is not a risk we should take. If we do, we will ensure that young, talented individuals will not locate in areas not served by broadband and that those who are already there will leave them, thereby undermining Colorado’s standing vis-a-vis other states and in the world economy more generally.

*Phil Weiser, a telecommunications law professor and executive director of the Silicon Flatirons Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder, is a co-chairman of the Broadband Infrastructure Task Force, part of the Governor’s Innovation Council.*

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