

Broadband: The next big step

September 25, 2007 Tuesday

Local companies active in the technology sector sometimes have an uncanny ability to see over the apparent horizon. Their long-range perspective is useful as our community ponders its next step toward truly advanced and universal broadband service -- "next generation broadband." The City Council is approaching an important vote on whether to approve EPB's "Fiber to the Home" project, which would bring "next generation broadband" to our area. The Chattanooga Technology Council was created to promote technology growth and serve as a voice for the technology industry to the media and governmental entities. Acting on that declared mission, we have reviewed public materials, taken the pulse of our members, met directly with EPB management and forged an internal consensus.

We conclude that local technology and economic development interests coincide in this case and justify a go-ahead signal. EPB is a legal entity of the City of Chattanooga, so City Council approval is a legal prerequisite for its entry into a competitive field and the issuance of revenue bonds to finance such a massive capital expenditure. Yet there is more at stake here than a one-time yes/no vote. The advisory role of knowledgeable civic officials and technology advocates will continue in the months and years to come as this infrastructure is deployed throughout the service territory of EPB. The citizens of Chattanooga are the owners of this enterprise, and they are entitled to a front-row seat.

EPB has been genuinely open and receptive to community views. There is no reason to think that transparency will change as new products and services are shaped and introduced. The initiative on the table would be a bold stroke in any city. It represents a significant advancement to technology. Among the advantages of "next generation broadband" are symmetrical and dramatically faster upload and download speeds and bandwidth that is both dedicated and scalable.

By being offered everywhere in the EPB service territory, the project would also provide access to more users than presently have access to the current generation of broadband. The pairing of electrical conduit and fiber optic lines holds the key to "smart energy" monitoring and metering, which should result in significant energy efficiencies and cost savings. Why Chattanooga? The likely result of the functional advantages realized by "next generation broadband" will be economic development and employment growth in the Chattanooga area. An independent study of the economic impact of broadband infrastructure envisions the creation of 2,600 jobs and \$300 million in income gains for Chattanooga over 10 years. A boost of this magnitude would compare favorably to the high-profile automotive investment prospects that our city, county and Chamber of

Commerce have been pursuing, and have greater potential for home-grown entrepreneurship.

The study was co-authored by Dr. Andy Novobilski of UTC, former chairman of the Technology Council, with economists Bento Lobo and Soumen Ghosh. Its conclusions are publicly available and have not been contested. The United States is estimated to rank 24th globally in per capita use of high-speed Internet connectivity ... and we are slipping. While Chattanooga is a mid-sized city, EPB ranks among the 20 largest municipally owned electric utilities. Because this initiative will be the largest bandwidth infrastructure plan by any of those power providers, other cities will be looking to our experience as a model.

For the past five years EPB has been providing its "next generation broadband" to large companies and bandwidth-intensive users such as medical imaging clinics. Its telecom division has learned from the experience of other cities. Some business models elsewhere are successful, and some are not; others are just out of the starting gate. We welcome this new burst of technology. The marketplace will ultimately sort out the most attractive products and services. Enhanced speed and universal access will raise the performance bar, inevitably causing other providers to respond with their own versions of stepped-up bandwidth deployment, to the ultimate benefit of Chattanooga businesses and residents.

To EPB and any future providers of such advanced technology, we can only say: Bring it on!

Paul S. Weidlich is a Chattanooga attorney and president and chairman of the board of the Chattanooga Technology Council.