

The Augusta Chronicle

State aims for broadband access

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Oh, to be Kentucky.

For a while last week, that had to be what the group of South Carolinians was thinking. Not because the Kentucky Wildcats' football team recently upset No. 1-ranked Louisiana State University. No, it was because Kentucky already is managing what South Carolina hopes to accomplish - statewide broadband Internet accessibility. "It's not about technology - it never has been. It never will be," said Joe Mefford, the statewide broadband director for ConnectKentucky. "It's about what you do with it." To that end, Kentucky helped each of its counties develop individualized technology plans designed to improve governmental efficiency and make the best use of the state's newly hooked-up citizenry. Kentucky also focused on getting pupils the Internet access and computer technology they need. "If a student doesn't have broadband at home, they're going to be left behind," Mr. Mefford said. "If you don't have that technology available in rural areas, then you're going to get further and further and further behind, and that really is what drags a state down," he said. That's something South Carolina already recognizes.

Members of the South Carolina Broadband Technology and Communications Study Committee recognize that getting broadband access to the entire state won't be easy. Still, they believe South Carolina is qualified to tackle the task, thanks to an upcoming move by the Federal Communications Commission. For decades, the FCC has designated a certain segment of the broadcasting spectrum for educational purposes. But, facing pressure from companies who want to purchase rights to use that spectrum for their Internet and cell-phone customers, the FCC has ordered that the spectrum be digitized within the next few years. "When you digitalize it, what you (could) do (using) the whole spectrum, you can do with 5 percent," said Moss Bresnahan, South Carolina Educational Television president, who also is a member of the study committee. The FCC is allowing the educational organizations, such as ETV, that control the spectrum to lease the newly created excess capacity to private companies to provide services for their customers.

Here's where South Carolina's situation is unusual: In other states, the spectrum is controlled by a variety of educational institutions. In South Carolina, the spectrum is controlled almost entirely by just one - ETV. "You know how much power you have because you have the spectrum and you have (companies) like Clearwire that want it," said Gerry Salemme, the executive vice president of Clearwire, which provides wireless broadband and phone services. "If you're looking at supply and demand, there is demand and you have the entire supply." The theory: Create a public-private partnership between the state, ETV and private companies. In exchange for building whatever towers and infrastructure would be needed to blanket the state in wireless broadband accessibility,

private companies would lease the airwaves and sell broadband connections to customers across South Carolina.

BY THE NUMBERS

Results since Kentucky began managing statewide broadband Internet access:

14,000

New technology jobs in Kentucky since the ConnectKentucky initiative started three years ago

\$667 million

Private capital invested in Kentucky telecommunications

518,000

New households that have gained broadband access

13 percent

Jump in the number of college graduates who stay in the state

3.1 percent

Increase in information technology jobs there, which had been declining