



Va. eyes Shore network

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CAPE CHARLES -- If Governor Tim Kaine's commitment to making broadband affordable and accessible in Virginia is any indication, a new fiber optic network providing open-access on the Shore soon should be a reality. But if community buy-in and funding sources prove elusive, then a competitive, multiple-provider information superhighway may bypass end users here. This summer Kaine announced the formation of a Broadband Roundtable to develop solutions to ensure access to Virginia businesses by 2010. Co-chaired by former Governor and broadband proponent Mark Warner and Aneesh Chopra, Virginia's technology secretary, the group's membership roster draws from state and local government, business and education.

Chopra and others were at Aqua last week to help push the governor's initiative forward and local interest financing were a big part of the discussion. "We've got to have two things," said Todd Christensen of the state's housing and community development department -- a key source of funding. "We need more money, and we're not going to be involved if no one hooks into it. We need a commitment from the community." "Why have a superhighway with no ramps to it? Why have \$185,000 in operating costs a year and no revenue," he said, making the point that providing the service to end users is futile if there are not enough subscribers using the service to make it economically viable.

Sheryl Bailey, executive director of the Virginia Resource Authority, said her organization acts as a strategic partner to local government. "After you go for all your funding and get it, then there is still a gap for local funding and that is what we help with," she said. "We have (low-interest financing) options for 10, 20 and 30 years. We don't want to fit you into a program, we want to work with your community." The authority was created by the General Assembly in 1984 to provide cost effective financial solutions to local governments for a variety of community investment projects that improve the quality of life for Virginians.

Chopra said the governor formed the roundtable in the summer after it was clear that "communities had passion" about broadband, but they also had questions. "What are the emerging technologies we should be considering in our plans? What values do we want to drive economic development, which application drivers," he said. To answer some of those questions, the Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission spearheaded a broadband study conducted in the spring. The results were compiled in July by consultants and engineer Keith Hill reported on some of those results. The study identified Internet-based needs in business and education and healthcare -- all areas that are the focus of community development grant funding sought by the local planning district commission.