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COVID-19 and broadband in Western North Carolina

Your Turn

The WNC Broadband Project Guest columnists

COVID-19 has changed nearly everything about our lives. Our public universities and our businesses have closed, our governments are enacting restrictions to limit transmission of the virus.

Our universities have transitioned to online learning for the balance of the semester. We are using technology to create daily and hourly “virtual” meetings, classes, and conferences. Gov. Cooper’s closure of K-12 schools will force a similar shift to remote learning for our children and teens. Businesses are asking employees to work from home.

The coronavirus pandemic highlights the importance of making adequate, reliable, leading-edge broadband infrastructure accessible to all American families. Comprehensive broadband can expand work from home, remote education, telemedicine and many other vital services—we can move information, not people.

Unfortunately, much of Western North Carolina lacks robust digital infrastructure. A survey by the Land of Sky Regional Council found that 13% of households in Buncombe, Henderson, Transylvania and Madison counties had no access to the internet. Many more homes had service speeds that don’t meet the federal definition of adequate broadband. Major service providers only invest in densely populated areas where modernizing the digital infrastructure costs less per household or business. Our rocky, mountainous terrain, as beautiful as it is, means high costs—many in WNC now live on the disenfranchised side of a growing “digital divide.”

In the 1930s, with the passage of the Communications Act of 1934 and the Rural Electrification Act in 1935, the U.S. extended telephone and electric service across the country. Electricity and telephone service was subsidized in unserved rural areas. The government granted local monopolies to larger providers, such as AT& T, and required them to serve all customers. Over the next 60 years, we developed the best communications infrastructure in the world.

However, with the development of the internet, the 1930s regulatory model broke down. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 treated internet access and cellular as competitive services, not regulated monopolies. This model worked well in urban America, where dense populations created competition among broadband providers. However, areas with lower population and higher build costs suffered. For some rural communities, the federal government is allocating

specials funds such as the \$16 billion Rural Development Opportunity program. However, much of WNC does not qualify for these funds—we aren't rural enough.

Take Sandy Mush in Buncombe County. Given the lack of a profitable, population-dense market and its hilly, rocky terrain, no affordable high-speed internet provider is available. Satellite services have assisted some residents, but the speeds are limited, the delay is too long for two-way real-time services, and the price is high. Rep. Brian Turner, citizen-activist Terri Wells, and others found funding to connect the Sandy Mush community center to high-speed Internet.

A Wi-Fi system extends coverage so parents can drive their students to community center parking lot, where the students sit to download assignments and surf the Internet. But service is still limited only to the community center.

Even high-income areas lack reliable broadband. To get high-speed internet, residents on Town Mountain Rd. in Buncombe County issued a Request for Proposals to find service providers to offer service based on a revenue-sharing agreement in trade for local investment from the residents. Time will tell if this effort will yield results.

COVID-19 highlights the importance of effective broadband infrastructure for telemedicine, remote work and education, virtual conferencing, and other critical utilities. And yet we fall further behind places like Boulder, CO, that are rapidly modernizing.

WNC needs broadband infrastructure that services all citizens. To tackle this problem, our government, business leaders, and residents need to: Create a valid inventory of critically unserved and underserved areas; Gather input from key stakeholders (residents, businesses, government, service providers) to develop a feasibility analysis for service expansion; Develop and implement public-private partnership initiatives that may include construction variances, residents' contributions, government grants, and long-term service-provider agreements.

The WNC Broadband Project (WNCBP), led by private citizens and UNC Asheville faculty and students, and supported by UNC Asheville Chancellor Nancy J. Cable, is advocating for broadband expansion across our region. The goal of WNCBP is to provide better information about regional broadband and to offer more effective strategies for our region's leadership and residents. WNCBP has created a website (www.wncbroadband.org) with tools that communities can use to address their internet service problems. COVID-19 is accelerating WNCBP's efforts, and should likewise accelerate those of legislators, government officials, foundations, and private citizens to create a high-speed, quality broadband infrastructure for everyone in Western North Carolina.

We are, indeed, all in this together.

Signed, Bill Sederburg, Chair, WNC Broadband Project; Stagg Newman, Lead Technical Advisor; Edward Katz, UNC Asheville Project Coordinator; Brian Drawert, UNC Asheville Technical Advisor and Frank DiPalma, Lead Public Policy Advisor.