



High speed Internet key economic factor

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Tennessee will be receiving a \$1.8 million federal grant to assist the state in mapping and planning for expanding broadband Internet access and use to underserved areas.

Expanding high-speed Internet service and making it as ubiquitous as landline telephone service is a key issue in economic development. Areas with broadband will be able to compete; those that don't have it will be left out.

The grant is part of funding provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. It is a matching grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

In the past, no business would think of locating where it did not have access to landline telephone service. Broadband Internet access is the 21st century equivalent of the hard-wired telephone. It is an essential business tool.

About half the state's geographic area is underserved by broadband infrastructure. That is mostly rural areas inhabited by about 10 percent of the state's residents. It will be hard for rural communities to survive and nearly impossible for them to attract economic development without a broadband communication infrastructure. The state can't abandon these communities.

Meeting this challenge will be expensive and likely require joint private/public efforts to make it affordable. But no aspect of rural life, especially education, can prosper without it. The time to plan and to begin building this infrastructure is now.

Later this month, the Obama administration will unveil a new public education initiative for the 21st century. A key component of the proposal will be to put Internet technology into the hands of every student and every teacher in America. That will be especially challenging in rural areas in Tennessee and throughout the country.

Communities that want to prosper will have to meet the modern technology needs of business and industry. That will take sizeable financial investments beyond creating a broadband infrastructure. It also will include building technology education into the public education system from pre-school to higher education. It will require training teachers to use technology in the classroom. It will enable teachers and students to adopt new ways of teaching and new ways of learning.

Future jobs, and many of today's jobs, will require technology competency as a prerequisite skill before being considered for employment. Technology competency will have to be learned right along with reading, writing, math and science. People who live in rural, technologically underserved areas can't be left behind.