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Williamson County ahead of broadband connection curve

<http://www.tennessean.com/article/20100120/WILLIAMSON01/1200322/2023/WILLIAMSON/Williamson+County+ahead+of+broadband+connection+curve>

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1/20/10

In their vision of Williamson County's not-so-distant future, students would bring laptops instead of books to class, farmers could make wireless Internet connections in their fields and library patrons could go online to pay for overdue books.

That is part of a vision developed by a group of 16 county leaders and residents who spent months considering how to improve the technology and use of technology here. They say it could help the local economy and lead to a higher quality of life.

Working with Connected Tennessee, an independent nonprofit organization supported by the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, the group recommends improvements in the business, health care, library, education, nonprofit, government, tourism, recreation and government sectors.

A recently released report identifies the top priorities for the next two years, which include pinpointing parts of the county in need of broadband Internet service and educating residents about technological advances in communication.

"Connected Tennessee is our opportunity to enhance our capabilities for better communications to all citizens of Williamson County," said Fred Banner, the city of Franklin's Information Technology Director. "Educating our community as to what services are available and providing our citizens with access to such is one of our main priorities."

Report urges help for small businesses

Recommendations from the group include teaching small business owners how technology can increase reach and profits, helping design better functioning Web sites and extending library services in communities where there is no Internet connectivity. "Small businesses still need help," said Larry Raybon, Connected Tennessee's state operations manager. "They are least likely to use Web sites, applications and the Internet, particularly new businesses getting started. But they are a major engine in the growth here."

Government agencies have begun offering online services such as vehicle registration renewal, property tax payments, and posting meeting agendas and documents. Many teachers post lesson plans online and communicate with parents via e-mail. Raybon said there are more services that could be offered online, but Williamson County already is among the most technologically advanced in the state.

"Williamson County has more use of technology and more resources than probably any other community in Tennessee," he said. "It's far ahead of so many other counties."

It's estimated that 84 percent of residents here have a computer and 67 percent have broadband service at home. Broadband is not available in 36 percent of Williamson County, mostly in unincorporated rural pockets.

Raybon said that once a broadband availability and demand survey is completed, that information would be passed on to Internet providers in the hopes that they'll bring service to people who want it.

"We have to show there are sufficient customers for them to make that investment," Raybon said. "Their objective is to make a profit."

Raybon said the group will explore the possibility of allowing companies to post fixed wireless broadcasting equipment on government-owned towers in an effort to lower the cost of providing such services in areas that lack it.

Connected Tennessee has developed relationships with telecommunications and information technology providers, public agencies, business leaders and researchers in an effort to bring these sectors together with the common goal of improving the state's economy and work force.