



Broadband Advisory Committee Final Report

Introduction

Access to broadband services is becoming a necessity. For many, it is an essential utility -- much like water and power. Economic development efforts, education, healthcare, and continuity of operations plans for government in the event of an emergency are becoming increasingly dependant on the need for high-speed internet service. Despite Virginia's reputation as having an established technology-based economy, this does not mean that the entire state has access to broadband services, either through fiber or wireless options. While metropolitan areas are well-wired, one can travel just a short distance from these hubs to find areas where the only option for an Internet connection is a dial-up service. This service is unacceptable to many businesses seeking to expand into more rural areas of the state, and does not support many of the applications that are becoming commonplace in how we live, work, and learn.

Legislative Members:

Senator William C. Wampler, Jr.
Delegate Joe T. May

Other Members

Aneesh P. Chopra, Secretary of Technology of the Commonwealth of Virginia

David Anderson, National Council on Readiness & Preparedness
Randal Arno, Cooper Center for Public Service
Scott Bashore, Loudoun County
Marty Dougherty, Roadstar Internet
Kelley Dunne, DigitalBridge Communications
Mark Flynn, Virginia Municipal League
Karen Jackson, Office of Telework Promotion and Broadband Assistance
Michael King, Northrup Grumman
Kathleen Kittrick, Cingular Wireless
Darryl Ladd, Cox Communications
John McDonald
Jeff Merriman, Verizon
John Neal, Ericsson

Joe Ordia, Ordia Solutions
Shawn Rodriguez, Nortel
William C. Rolfe, County Administrator, Orange County
Gerald Stegmaier, Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati
John Westerman, Loudoun Wireless

Summary

JCOTS formed a broadband advisory committee as an attempt to begin to plan how to bring broadband to underserved areas. While many areas that are underserved are in more rural parts of the state, there are also many areas just outside of more urban areas -- such as parts of Loudoun County in Northern Virginia, or Goochland just beyond the Richmond suburban area -- where broadband services are not available. Most, if not all, localities are aware of the importance of providing broadband, but are unsure of how local government fits into the bigger picture of ensuring broadband is available to all residents of the Commonwealth. While the focus of this advisory committee was initially on the provision of wireless broadband services, it quickly became apparent that some areas might require the benefits of fiber-based broadband, and the committee expanded its scope to become "technology agnostic," so to speak.

It is also important to note that one of the drivers in establishing a JCOTS broadband group was borne out of previous studies of various technology applications. The 2006 Interim saw studies relating to telework and electronic medical records; 2007 saw the continuation of electronic medical records, and a focus on educational resources available online. At all of these meetings, as well as others, conversations frequently turn to the underlying issue of broadband accessibility -- without the bandwidth offered by broadband, many medical, educational, and business related applications cannot be put to use.

Through the discussions during the three meetings held by this advisory committee, it became apparent that one item that is lacking in the marketplace is a practical, "how-to" guide for local governments interested in addressing the broadband issue. Deployment of broadband services seems well-suited for many public-private partnerships, but often localities do not know how to begin down this path, or what policy resources are already available to them through the Code of Virginia. Examples of policies already in place include the Virginia Public-Private Education Facilities and Infrastructure Act (PPEA), which would include broadband and wireless broadband projects; the Virginia Resources Authority, who was statutorily authorized by the 2007 Session of the General Assembly to provide financing to localities for wireless broadband deployment; and the authorization to create wireless authorities. It was generally agreed that explaining these policies in one place would be helpful for local governments.

During the course of the Interim, the Advisory Committee also had the opportunity to hear several "case studies" of approaches that some localities have already taken in seeking out broadband solutions. For example, the group learned about Digital Bridge's planned launch of a WiMax network in Appomattox, Bristol Virginia's launch of

broadband services through its utility functions, and King George's establishment of a Broadband Authority and subsequent request for proposals under the PPEA. Each case study offered lessons learned that could be passed on to other localities seeking to follow in their footsteps.

Final Recommendations

As noted above, the Advisory Committee would like to put together a template or guide that local government officials can use in deciding how to best approach the broadband issue in their locality. Staff has begun work on such a report, and with the approval of JCOTS, will continue work on this project.

Also, in an attempt to remain "technology agnostic," the Virginia Resources Authority enabling legislation should be amended to allow for the financing of all broadband projects -- and not just wireless broadband projects. This was not a formal recommendation of the Advisory Committee, but is an issue that Delegate May would like to pursue in light of committee discussions.