

Abundant Broadband—Will We Create Our Desired Future?

By Bill Gillis

How do we achieve America's desired broadband future? This question is a frequent focus of public policy forums at both the national and state levels. The stakes are high. America is no longer among the world leaders in broadband adoption – to its competitive disadvantage and long-range danger.

- More than 50 million Americans still have no broadband option available to them.
- Millions more Americans have a possible broadband option available to their home or business, but for various reasons are unable or uninterested in tapping that option.

The US Farm Bill directs the Chairman of the FCC to coordinate with the Secretary of Agriculture to develop a comprehensive rural broadband strategy for America. This Congressional directive has the potential to be an important step forward. However, it is probable that this process will be hindered by deep divisions of stakeholders with different agendas and world views unless the challenge is approached from a different direction. Specifically, it is critical that any strategy be grounded in a consensus vision of what is the future we truly want for America in an era of abundant broadband.

When the summer of 2017 is the new “today”, will the nation's broadband communications system enabled new innovation to make health care and education affordable and accessible to ALL Americans? Are technologies available “today” (2017) sufficient to ensure EVERY American community is positioned to be economically competitive in the global economy? In 2017, is our national information technology system rich enough to ensure the most effective and rapid response possible in the event of an emergency or national threat?

While the importance of having a vision may seem obvious, too often strategies are created by seeking stakeholder consensus on the best path forward into an uncertain future without giving serious consideration of the future we desire to create. When a strategy is not guided by a well articulated and agreed upon vision of the future we believe possible and desire, the tendency is to:

- Look for something broken and try to fix it.
- Impose solutions from the past, even though the world has moved on and the context today -- and anticipated for the future -- is very different.
- See reality (e.g. new emerging technologies, consumers unable to afford services, isolated rural regions...) as just more unwelcome complexity -- rather than an opportunity to solve problems in different ways.

By focusing first on discovering consensus on the future we truly want, we create a shared motivation to move beyond the easy answers, and then can be positioned to agree upon a strategy to build the kind of overall broadband future that will really meet the needs of ALL Americans.

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