

Briefing: The Need for Broadband in America and for Federal Leadership

The US Lacks Sufficient Broadband: **By virtually any account, the United States has lost to other nations our competitive advantage in broadband deployment.** According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the US ranks 15th in the world in per capita broadband deployment—less than a decade ago, we were first.

In the US, rural areas in many cases do not even have cellular phone service, and cable modem and DSL may be available only in population centers—in fact, a substantial portion of rural America has no access to broadband.

Urban and suburban areas face dramatic bandwidth scarcity and a patent lack of competition.

Broadband is Essential to the National Interest: Calls for more, better broadband is not driven by a need for more television channels; on the contrary, high-bandwidth broadband facilitates other goals: innovation, job growth, workforce preparedness, economic development, education, and community development. Broadband has become such a key resource for workers and students that the United Nations has suggested it be considered a utility akin to water and electricity.

High-bandwidth broadband is widely-recognized a key driver of future economic competitiveness, and is also regarded as a facilitator of political discourse and activity – the most important medium for communication and expression of political ideas since the advent of television.

But private-sector networks are not meeting this growing demand for bandwidth and speed in an affordable manner.

Localities Have Long Worked to Expand Broadband Access: For two decades, many local communities have sought to deploy networks (or encourage the private sector to do the same) that would expand access to broadband communications—in the early days, to cable television services; more recently, to Internet as well as video and voice services. Since the 1980s, many local governments and municipal electric utilities have sought to increase broadband communications availability through ambitious projects including constructing competitive cable television systems, building fiber optics to business areas or development parks to spur economic development, building wireless broadband networks, and deploying fiber optics to all homes and businesses in a community. The recent wave of community wireless networks has been a high-profile continuation of this form of local effort.

The Nation Needs a Coordinated Federal Strategy and Support: Local efforts have occurred in an environment in which the Federal Government has been absent. What drives many community broadband initiatives is the need to fill a gap left by an absence of a Federal broadband strategy. The lack of coordinated US policy is even more troubling in an era when our competitor nations in Europe and, particularly, Asia, have robust and aggressive national policies to build next generation, high-speed networks.

Local communities would be well-served to ask our national representatives to become true partners in broadband planning and deployment. Imagine the potential benefits for the nation and our communities of meaningful Federal involvement, both in planning and in funding. Localities will, by necessity and by choice, be part of the solution to our national broadband deficit. But we need a Federal partner, soon