

Logan Cluff, Aitkin Township, Aitkin County

Rural Broadband Essential for America's Future

Access to broadband would open many new doors for rural communities by allowing people to reach out far beyond their geographic regions. Being connected allows families to stay connected. FaceTime, Facebook, Skype and many other social media apps help families stay in touch with those that aren't close by. Streaming movies, music and playing interactive on-line games are also many of the things that need broadband internet. While these things are not a necessity to life, they really make it much more enjoyable.

Broadband in the rural areas could bring a lot more job opportunities by allowing people to work from home. Many employers are finding it more economical to hire people that never have to travel to the office, but instead do all their work from home. Education for both kids in school and adults looking to further their education would be possible. Distance learning through on-line colleges and virtual schools are becoming more popular with schools offering more on-line classes every day. Broadband would also allow for great improvements in the healthcare systems in rural areas. The use of telemedicine can lower costs and improve patient access to providers.

Fiber to the home would be the best option to get broadband out to people. This technology would be able to meet the needs of people now and be expendable to what future needs may require. However, the cost of this technology is extremely high. Building a fiber network is a big gamble for any communications company, because there is no guarantee that people will take the service. Also the distance between people's homes can be anywhere from one to ten miles. Adding a fixed wireless technology to the mix would be a great option to reach more people and give some internet options to those that have none.

All governments need to modernize their telecommunications policies. The federal governments, Connect America Fund (CAF) that is used to help fund telephone services offered by corporate telco's, should also be available to other providers of internet access. Broadband is replacing phone lines and this money could get access to many more users. At the state level, Minnesota is moving in the right direction with the development of the Office of Broadband and the Border to Border grants. These grants are helping communities expand services to underserved areas but the extreme rural areas of Minnesota are still being left behind. The grant process is not easy and can be costly for lower income counties and companies to find a way to start. To help alleviate those issues, there should be different levels of funding based on the economies and current availability in a predefined area. Economic development will depend on the local government's involvement and bringing attention to where broadband is needed. Not all communities will need the fastest internet service available, but they need it to be reliable and affordable.