

Wiring the wild Park?

By JESSICA COLLIER, Enterprise Staff Writer

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Article Photos



This cartoon is one Clarkson University is using for its Adirondack Initiative for Wired Work.

In the state Adirondack Park, residents and businesses often say that the strict regulations make it too difficult to develop new businesses, which is bad news for the Park's economy.

"Everybody's trying to understand how we can have a sustainable Park within the parameters that make it a pristine and beautiful place to visit and live, how you can have an economy that goes along with that vision," said Clarkson University President Tony Collins.

That's why Collins and others around the Park are trying to get creative and find new ways to develop business and create jobs without building new businesses here. Many see broadband - high-speed Internet connections that allow much quicker upload and download speeds than dial-up connections - as a way to do so.

"I think telecommuting and using the Internet to support businesses - I kind of call it a no-brainer, that if we can do this, it would be the perfect way to provide a sustainable, even growing, economy that would be completely compatible with the region," Collins said.

Need

Right now, broadband coverage in the Park is spotty at best, Collins said. He estimated that 70 percent of the Park is not covered by broadband, and of the remaining 30 percent that is covered, only about 30 percent of those people are connected to it.

This often happens because the service may be too expensive or because people may not understand how broadband can help their lives, said Howard Lowe, director of SUNY Plattsburgh's Technical Assistance Center.

But if people in the Park can get more prevalent and reliable broadband connections, they could work online from home or business centers. Park residents could telecommute to work for businesses anywhere in the world, or they could create or bolster their own businesses selling goods and services online, Collins said.

Doing more business online would bring money from outside the Park in. When outside-the-Park companies build businesses in the Park, some of the money they make here flows back out of the region, but the Adirondack economy also expands.

The crux

There are many benefits to building up the high-speed Internet infrastructure in the Adirondacks, but the reason it hasn't been done yet boils down to money. With the low customer base and difficult terrain, Internet service providers have not had much incentive to create strong broadband networks here.

"It's too expensive for any one company to build a network like this, and that's why people are not served," Lowe said. "But if the public sector steps in as the federal government is doing and subsidized the cost of network, then the private sector has an affordable way to expand their services to areas that can't get service right now."

CBN Connect

At Plattsburgh's TAC, Lowe helped develop over about the last five years CBN Connect, which stands for Community Broadband Network Connect, a nonprofit corporation that aims to create an infrastructure base for wider-reaching and more reliable broadband service.

Lowe and his colleagues at CBN Connect are working on an application for about \$22 million in federal stimulus money (but he said the number changes every day) to build a "middle-mile," fiber-optic network. Fiber-optic connections, on which pulses of light are sent through razor-thin strands of flexible glass or other transparent material, are for the most part the fastest in Internet connection technology today.

As a middle-mile network, the CBN Connect line, which Lowe envisions as a ring through Clinton, Essex and Franklin counties, would not connect directly to homes. It would go to what he calls anchor institutions, like libraries, health centers, colleges, The Wild Center museum and the Trudeau Institute disease research center. From that ring, the idea is that Internet service providers like Verizon, Time Warner and AT&T would rent bandwidth and connect to homes and other buildings not yet covered.

The plan includes making the network redundant to increase reliability, so Lowe said he expects to connect the fiber-optic network to ones in Albany and the one west of this region that was created by Watertown's Development Authority of the North Country. The 750-mile DANC network that serves Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence counties is serving as the model for what CBN Connect wants to do here.

"They have proven that this business is sustainable and that there is a demand for it," Lowe said.

If and when the Clinton-Essex-Franklin network is completed, Lowe said the people at CBN Connect want to continue south in their efforts, creating fiber-optic networks in Warren, Hamilton and Washington counties.

"We want this area to have the best connectivity possible," Lowe said.

Clarkson's Adirondack Initiative

At Clarkson, Collins and his colleagues have partnered with other groups around the region to create the Adirondack Initiative for Wired Work, which will aim to use broadband connections to help people make a living while living in the Adirondacks.

"It's a kind of hardware/software distinction," Lowe said. "We're going to build the infrastructure, but we're not going to provide services on it. Their outreach is to provide services for end users."

The Adirondack Initiative is helping local government entities write proposals for stimulus funds that would bring broadband here, working with small businesses, and helping open work stations throughout the Park where professionals can use broadband at work stations or in meeting spaces.

"Imagine if you were able to support telecommuters so that they would be able to successfully telecommute from their front porch and make it their front office," Collins said.

One business center is already open in Blue Mountain Lake, and Collins said there are plans to open more in places like Saranac Lake, Lake Placid, Tupper Lake, Old Forge and North Creek. They would be similar to a business center in a hotel, but also a place for professionals to get together and hold meetings, like a 21st century version of a local fire hall, he said.

The Adirondack Initiative is also applying for stimulus money for these projects, but from a different funding source than CBN Connect.

As part of their plan to get all the people working on broadband in the area to coordinate, the Adirondack Initiative will hold a conference at Clarkson on Sept. 8 for anyone who may be interested in creating or using a strong base for telecommuting in the Adirondacks. To register for the conference, go to www.clarkson.edu/adk.

How broadband can help

There are state and federal grants for agencies that try to help people understand how broadband can help them. An agency called Digital Towpath, in Oneida County, helps

municipalities like Franklin County set up government Web sites so citizens can get information that they can use every day, Lowe said.

"That's the kind of thing that can drive broadband adoption," Lowe said.

Support

Collins said he hopes U.S. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand will attend the conference. Gillibrand has shown support for rural broadband initiatives in the past, most recently announcing last week that she will introduce an act that would create an Office of Rural Broadband Initiatives in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which would steer grants and loans to expand broadband access in rural areas.

U.S. Rep. Scott Murphy is also trying to help rural broadband efforts. Last week, the Glens Falls Democrat sent a letter to the secretaries of the U.S. Agriculture and Commerce departments, the two governing broadband stimulus funds, asking them to redefine terms in stimulus provisions that, if kept the way they are, would prevent most of his district from getting full funding.

APA

The state Adirondack Park Agency is also showing broadband initiatives support. Spokesman Keith McKeever said APA staff has been working closely with CBN Connect on their plans for installing fiber-optic infrastructure.

McKeever said the plans mostly include the lines being connected to existing poles, which would exempt it from a lengthy APA permit process. If, however, it does become a project that demands APA jurisdiction, McKeever said the APA plans to work with CBN Connect to make the process as quick and easy as possible.

The APA sees broadband as a way to create jobs in a way that has little physical impact on the Park, he said.

"Broadband is a priority for the agency," McKeever said.

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Phone, cable firms agree to share info for federal broadband map

By JOELLE TESSLER, AP Technology Writer

WASHINGTON - The country's biggest phone and cable companies have agreed to hand over information about their broadband networks to help the federal government produce a national map showing where high-speed Internet connections are available across the U.S.

AT&T Inc., Verizon Communications Inc. and Comcast Corp. have told the Commerce Department that they are committed to helping the government "complete the important and difficult task of mapping broadband availability."

Trade groups representing a broad cross-section of the telecommunications sector, including wireless carriers, rural phone and cable companies and the industry giants, are also encouraging their members to cooperate with the Congressionally mandated effort.

"The information that the broadband carriers are now committed to providing is crucial to the creation of the national broadband map," said Lawrence Strickling, head of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, the arm of the Commerce Department that is overseeing the mapping project.

Congress included up to \$350 million in the economic stimulus bill passed in February to develop a "comprehensive nationwide inventory map of existing broadband service capability and availability in the United States."

The NTIA will be awarding grants to entities in each state to gather data on everything from the availability of different broadband technologies to connection speeds at the local level. The data will be used to produce an interactive national broadband map that Americans everywhere can search to find local broadband services. Regulators and lawmakers also plan to use the data to target broadband investments and shape policy to bring affordable high-speed connections to all corners of the country.

Friday's announcement is the product of weeks of talks among the NTIA, telecom carriers, state officials and public interest groups. And it represents an attempt to balance the needs of the NTIA, which wants to collect data that is detailed enough to produce a robust map, and the concerns of the telecom companies, which don't want to be overburdened by impractical data reporting requirements and don't want to make too much sensitive information available to competitors. The carriers pledged their cooperation after the NTIA modified its data requirements to address industry concerns.

In one key change, the agency said it is no longer seeking data showing broadband options at the street-address level and will instead accept data showing availability at the census-block level for more densely populated areas. For less densely populated areas, the agency will accept data showing broadband availability for address ranges in each census block.

Thomas Power, chief of staff for the NTIA, noted that census-block-level data is likely to be more reliable than address-level data since it may not be practical to map broadband to every single address in the country.

The agency also said it is no longer seeking average revenue data, which telecom companies consider to be proprietary. That data also can be difficult to pinpoint when broadband is sold as part of a bundle of telecom services.

Glenn Reynolds, vice president of policy for the U.S. Telecom Association, said the new data requirements will "facilitate the accurate and timely completion of the broadband map without risking the release of sensitive data."