

Periodic Congressional Assignment Series Memorandum

Re: A Nationwide "Broadband Census."

Introduction

The late Congressman Mo Udall's sometimes best remembered for saying, "Everything's been said -- but not everyone has said it." And, that came to mind this past week, when Congressman Ed Markey and the House Telecommunications and the Internet Subcommittee held yet another hearing on broadband, the FCC's Universal Service Fund, and whether the Federal Government's doing enough.

A North Carolina state official participated, and talked about efforts in her state to promote the development -- and, use -- of high-speed Internet services. She had an interesting statistic, incidentally: About 89% of homes in the state with children now have a computer and some kind of Internet connection, usually a high-speed link. Maybe that's the solution to any "digital divide" worries -- make everyone get a kid, right?

NGA Where Are You?

But the most interesting aspect of these latest hearings was the impression the Federal Government remains the essential, vital "piece part" here -- and, all those Governors, task forces, and state government agencies (as well as a lot of local government units) really aren't doing much. If they exist at all.

Are the country's 40,000-odd Governmental units really asleep at the switch, however? We know that's not true in Arkansas, California, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, and Tennessee -- and, we expect if you check, you'll find there's some sort of broadband development initiative underway in virtually every state. "Fly-over America," in short, really isn't asleep!

And, that's understandable, isn't it? Governors, remember, are uniformly big on construction, deployment, investment, jobs, economic progress -- good, positive things like that. It's too bad we don't have people like that running the country, isn't it?

Washington today is filled with people who have all sorts of reasons why more domestic manufacturing, expanded energy production, etc., are just impossible. You sort of wonder how we won World War II, or sent people to the moon, with "normative" views like that. But you go to any state capital in the country and mention you want to foster economic development and you'll be greeted enthusiastically, won't you? Broadband? Governors love it, that's for sure.

Before Developing a Federal Program

Now, your Review's noted the confusion which already obtains regarding

broadband -- and, whether it's universally available. In that regard, by the way, one of the House Subcommittee witnesses was George Lucas of Starwars and "Edutopia" fame -- and, he agreed with us: "The whole world is going wireless."

But before developing a new Federal program, don't you think it'd be a good idea to conduct a nationwide survey, a census -- to figure out exactly what's happening in the states?

In theory, the FCC, or the U.S. Department of Commerce, ought to be doing this. One probably could also write the National Governors Association, and get some sort of response from them. But wouldn't it make more sense for Chairman Ed Markey -- or, full Commerce Committee Chairman John Dingell -- just to send a letter to every Governor (plus the Mayor of the District of Columbia)?

"Less is More"

Ourselves, we'd ask the Governors on one page to say what's happening in their state -- and, who the Subcommittee needs to contact to get more information. Of course, people working with Governors appreciate brevity, succinctness -- and, you'd probably get just that.

(By comparison, you couldn't get a one-page response from the FCC -- or, most Federal agencies -- if Luca Brasi were holding a Glock 9 mm. to their head.)

A Congressional report that in few pages actually said what's happening in "broadband" nationwide would be something of a best-seller, we expect. And, wouldn't it make sense to assemble this information before launching some new, potentially costly Federal broadband initiative?

Conclusion

This is a continent-sized country of more than 300 million people -- and, they're not all just sitting out there, in the provinces, waiting for Federal help and guidance. Heck, a lot of states and communities have paid a lot more attention to "broadband" longer than most people in Washington.

But Washington needs to get a better handle on these things, doesn't it? Granted, the House and Senate committees have done yeoman duty over the past couple of years (a lot was done, remember, when passage of Federal cable franchising legislation was at-issue in 2006). But we need more comprehensive and succinct information.

So our recommendation? Congressman Markey should write every Governor, ask for a reply by the end of August, then have staff assemble that information in a short, highly readable report. A national broadband survey, state-by-state? Well, we're for it!

