

Daily News (Bowling Green, KY)

August 31, 2006

Broadband access group given award Government recognizes ConnectKentucky for contributions to economic development

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Bowling Green-based ConnectKentucky received a crystal Tiffany and Co. bowl engraved by the U.S. Department of Commerce's **Economic Development Administration** Wednesday afternoon for being a national leader in **economic development**.

The public-private nonprofit organization is charged with implementing Gov. Ernie Fletcher's Prescription for Innovation, a plan to speed up technology growth in the areas of broadband availability, usage and technological literacy.

Federal, state and local officials gathered at the Warren County courthouse to present ConnectKentucky with the award.

As the 2006 "Excellence in **Economic Development** Award" winner, ConnectKentucky will be highlighted in the EDA's national publication, the **Economic Development** America Magazine, according to Sandy Baruah, EDA assistant secretary, who attended the event on behalf of President Bush.

The award comes as the deadline to Fletcher's initiative edges closer to having full broadband deployment by the end of 2007 – one of four benchmarks in the Prescription for Innovation initiative.

"What we know here today is that ConnectKentucky is a national leader in **economic development**," Baruah said. "Soon, a lot of other folks will know this."

Brian Mefford, president and CEO of ConnectKentucky, said his organization was "very humbled by the recognition."

Because of ConnectKentucky's efforts, 82 percent of Kentucky homes can access broadband, marking a 36 percent increase in broadband availability and 45 percent increase in broadband usage, according to Mefford.

Each year, the EDA presents the Excellence in **Economic Development** Award on the best and brightest examples of **economic development** strategy and results. Award winners are selected by a distinguished and independent panel of **economic development** leaders, noted academics and government officials from across America.

"Believe me, the competition for these awards is intense as the bar for creative and innovative **economic development** initiatives gets raised every year," he said. "Kentucky, however, is special as it has received an EDA Excellence Award for three consecutive years, illustrating Kentucky's leadership in developing successful 21st century **economic development** strategies."

Kentucky Executive Cabinet Secretary Robbie Rudolph said ConnectKentucky is putting in place "the infrastructure to (build) strong communities to stimulate **economic** opportunities.

"Now with broadband, farmers can find ways to run the farm more efficiently and find more

opportunities,” he said.

Warren County Judge-Executive Mike Buchanon said ConnectKentucky is “helping to develop the state into a more business-friendly place for everyone.”

U.S. Rep. Ron Lewis, R-Cecilia, said ConnectKentucky’s efforts will touch the small business, health care and higher learning sectors for the better.

ConnectKentucky’s private sector participation was critical to its success, Baruah said.

“While governments at all levels can be important players in **economic development**, let’s not forget that it is the private sector that is the most important element of any successful **economic development** strategy,” he said. “Unless the private sector is ready, willing and able to invest in a community, **economic** growth simply will not occur regardless how much government spends.”

Baruah also noted technological innovation as the key for America to stay ahead in global leadership.

“As the 21st century takes shape, more and more of us realize we are truly living in a worldwide marketplace. While America is a leader today and has immense competitive advantages, we cannot take our leadership for granted.”

In June, ConnectKentucky received national attention for winning the 2006 Southern Growth Policies Board Innovator Award, out of more than 200 nominees in the southern region, for its No Child Left Offline initiative.

No Child Left Offline was launched in January using surplus government computers refurbished with a Microsoft Windows XP operating system, MS Office 2003 software, a software security suite from CA Inc., along with a new ink jet printer from Lexmark International. Kentucky Correctional Industries helps ConnectKentucky transport and refurbish the computers with prison labor.

Almost 1,000 computers and printers have been delivered to the homes of selected eighth-graders. Although 2,000 computers were set to be delivered by the end of this year, the project has been put on hold to seek foundation support for the program.

— To learn more about ConnectKentucky, visit <http://www.connectkentucky.org>.

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