



**Article:** Broadband need brings U.S. senator to Logan

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LOGAN — The need for affordable broadband access throughout Hocking County was the focus of a roundtable discussion Tuesday in which U.S. Sen. George Voinovich and other area leaders participated.

“Broadband means getting high-speed Internet action. If you don’t have broadband, businesses you have may not stay,” declared Voinovich when the meeting began. “It is extremely important to the economic development of this region of Ohio. If we’re going to stay competitive (in Ohio) we need this.”

He added that awareness and education is another component in getting broadband to the region, because many people can’t see the benefit of having it. “There’s still much work that’s got to be done. Studies have shown that of people with no broadband access, 50 percent claim they don’t need it and don’t understand the benefits.” Bill Rinehart, executive director of the Hocking County Community Improvement Corporation, echoed the same sentiment after the meeting, and said people need to realize how broadband can directly benefit them.

“You can’t look at today. You have to look down the road. Almost all banks are going to online banking,” he noted. “For students, while at school there are plenty of computers; when they go home they need access to the Internet. Students need the Internet at home now. Just think what it will be like 10 or 20 years from now.”

“We also have cabin establishments and artists,” he said. “If they had access to high-speed Internet, they could expand their businesses.”

“Is it essential for every Ohioan to have access to information?” asked Brian Phillips of the Ohio College of Osteopathy. “It think it’s a new commitment,” he said. He added in comparison that when electricity was first introduced to homes in the 1930s and ’40s, many people in rural communities didn’t hook up to power lines, despite seeing them alongside the road next to their homes.

While Rinehart noted the importance of awareness, during the meeting he also stressed that broadband needs to be affordable. “With unemployment the way it

is, people won't pay \$60 or \$70 per month. Economically, people just can't afford that," he said.

Currently, an organization called Connect Ohio is working with Hocking, Perry and Vinton counties to map the local terrain and determine where towers need to be in the tri-county area for broadband access.

While the state of Ohio has paid for the mapping details, the tri-county area would have to pay for the actual hardware and equipment. According to Rinehart, "We've been told it will cost the (Hocking County) commissioners (approximately) \$300,000. We haven't asked the commissioners for money yet, but at some point in time, we'll have to go to them. And with the budget restraints, I'm just not sure how that will happen."

Grant funding is available for equipment, however; and Sen. Voinovich suggested exhausting every possible grant resource to make it happen, before asking voters to pass a levy.

Voinovich asked Anne Pope, federal co-chairperson of the Appalachian Regional Commission, how money was raised during a similar broadband outreach effort in Kentucky.

"It was mostly piecemeal," she said. "It really called together the private sector. There was a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Some state subsidies and more federal money and some private entities were called on."

The broadband effort in Kentucky, aptly named Connect Kentucky, was extremely successful, said Pope. "It was an experiment in rural America," she said.

According to Phillip Brown, national policy director for Connect Ohio and Connected Nation, private companies in Kentucky provided \$86 million over three years.

Between the private sector and state of Kentucky which invested \$7.5 million, the state now meets the national average for broadband adoptability among its residents.

Ohio Sen. Joy Padgett (R-20th District) suggested looking at cellular phone services in Southeastern Ohio as well, and not just limiting the project to obtaining broadband access. "There are pockets in Ohio where there is no cell phone service. I traveled from Zanesville to just north of Logan before getting service today," she noted.

It affects economic development in the area, she added. “Two CEOs from Coshocton County were upset because they couldn’t use their cell phones.” The company stopped looking at potential business sites afterward.