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Task force seeks to bring broadband to rural Minn.

A new report pushes for statewide broadband Internet by 2015.

By **Jerimiah Oetting** [3] November 17, 2009 (3 years ago)

In an ancient home surrounded by the solitude of rural Minnesota, a man sits quietly in his rocking chair downloading episodes of “The Office” and playing World of Warcraft on his laptop.

While this hypothetical situation seems more fitting for a dorm room than a farmhouse, a new report urging for ubiquitous broadband Internet access across the state could make it possible. Since its inception in April 2008, The Minnesota Ultra High-Speed Broadband Task Force has been developing a plan to make broadband Internet available to all Minnesotans by 2015. On Nov. 6, the task force proposed its report to the Minnesota Legislature.

Jack Geller represented rural users on the task force. He said providing high-speed Internet to “the last farmstead at the end of the gravel road” is an important goal.

“Being out in a rural area disadvantages you in some ways in terms of the barriers of time and distance to services,” he said. “Broadband is a technology that obviously can transcend that.” Geller said a key development of the task force was the definition of a minimum speed for the state.

“When you’re the rural guy, you realize there’s a good chance that whatever that minimum is set at is what many parts of rural Minnesota are going to get,” he said.

The task force decided that download speeds of 10-25 megabits per second (Mbps) is an attainable goal for the state. Current residential speeds for Comcast are at 12 Mbps, according to the Comcast Web site.

Mike O’Connor, a semi-retired entrepreneur who represented urban users, said the speed recommendation might not have been ambitious enough.

“The speed goal that we set is pretty good,” he said. “It’s not a gigabit (1,024 Mbps) into every house, which would be totally cool.”

O’Connor said one of the more aggressive aspirations of the report was for Minnesota to be one of the top five states for overall broadband speed by 2015.

“Five years from now, 10-20 Mbps probably isn’t going to be very exciting,” he said.

O’Connor and Geller each represent users with different needs and expectations. Both said this diversity is what led to the report’s strength.

“That’s the only document I’ve ever seen that has got all of the bases covered,” O’Connor said.

“It has the agreements of both the consumer and provider representatives.”

The diverse 23-member task force included representatives from government, various communities, businesses and telecommunication companies like Qwest and Comcast. Dan McElroy, the commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, said he was surprised that the diverse group was able to reach a consensus. “Companies like Qwest and Comcast have billions of dollars invested in the status quo,” he said. “I think it spoke well of them that they recommend to the state that we take on this world-class standard.”

McElroy believes that statewide broadband access encourages economic development.

“The ability to sit in any place in Minnesota and do business as if you were in New York ... increases our competitive advantage,” he said.

The task force recommended the Legislature continue its work by creating a Broadband Advisory Council, which would work on implementing the task force’s recommendations.

McElroy said he thinks the Legislature will follow their advice.

“I don’t know in what form a broadband group will continue,” he said. “But all the legislators who have reacted to the report think that was a good idea.”

O’Connor said there have already been eight reports created in Minnesota similar to this one.

“The most important thing is follow-through,” he said. “If nobody does anything, then this will be report No. 9.”

With the Legislature’s upcoming term in February, it remains to be seen if the recommendations of the task force will be heard.

“We’ve always known Minnesota was a cool place to live,” McElroy said. “With high-speed bandwidth, we can function as if we’re at almost any place on the planet.”

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