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Agency working on broadband availability map

by **George Hohmann**
Daily Mail Business Editor

CHARLESTON, W.Va.--The first-ever National Broadband Map contains stale data and isn't user-friendly, said Michael Hohn, director of the West Virginia Geological and Economic Survey.

Hohn's agency is working with the consulting firm L.R. Kimball on another map that will show where broadband is and is not available in West Virginia. "Our site will be better - it has got to be better," Hohn told members of the state Broadband Council on Thursday.

The map being created by Hohn's agency and L.R. Kimball is expected to be posted online in early April.

The National Broadband Map was released last week. It is online at www.broadbandmap.gov. It shows that most of West Virginia does not have access to broadband. But Hohn pointed out that it was built with June 30, 2010, data. "With some of the larger providers, a lot of changes and additions have taken place since then so it is not accurate," he said.

Hohn said he called the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, the federal agency in charge of the national map, to ask why they posted a map with data that is almost a year old. "They're difficult to talk to," Hohn said. "They're probably getting calls from many states. I'd say what NTIA did is a good model of what not to do."

Hohn said he looked at the national map from his home, where he has digital subscriber line, or DSL, service. "I couldn't use it (the national map)," he said. "I thought it was so slow. If I'd been on dial-up wondering where I could get broadband I would still be wondering."

During a public comment session the Rev. James Patterson told the Broadband Council, "You've got to step your game up."

Patterson is a member of the executive committee of the Central Appalachia Regional Network, which is comprised of 22 community organizations in six states. He noted that various government agencies and companies have announced plans to spend nearly a half-billion dollars on broadband in West Virginia.

He urged the council to consider whether, in four years, it will be able to answer four questions:

- "Do we have universal broadband for the whole state?

- "Is that high speed truly high-speed broadband? I know we haven't all agreed on what high speed is but the President said we should consider 10 megabits if we are to be competitive with other countries.

- "Is broadband affordable to low- and moderate-income families?

- "Did we keep another digital divide from occurring?"

Patterson said he is aware of a recent ruling by the Attorney General's Office that the Broadband Council does not have power over the broadband implementation process.

"Maybe I shouldn't say this but not having the power doesn't stop anybody in the statehouse," Patterson said. "Just because you don't have the power doesn't mean you don't have the power to monitor, evaluate. I want an entity where I can walk in four years from now and ask those four questions. I would be interested in coming back in four years and having you answer those questions for me.

"I know West Virginia has unique challenges (deploying broadband) from a geographical perspective," Patterson said. "But I want us to get this idea that we can do it anyway. We all have an interest in this broadband deployment. We just have to step our game up and get it done."

Patterson said broadband involves building the infrastructure and, just as critical, making sure there is a demand fo the service. The demand side hasn't been addressed much, he said.

A recent survey showed that 43 percent of the people don't believe broadband should be a major concern of the government and 48 percent say it isn't relevant. "If 48 percent of the folks in West Virginia believe broadband isn't relevant, we have a problem," Patterson said.

According to a U.S. Department of Commerce survey, 67 percent of whites but only 56 percent of African-Americans were broadband users in 2010, Patterson said.

Time and again technology has been made available to people of color, only to pass them by, he said. "I'm here to make sure it doesn't happen this time. We see broadband as a fundamental communications right. You absolutely have to have it. If you don't, you'll be continually isolated.

"Without broadband, folks can't get jobs, can't have an adequate education, can't have access to adequate health care It's critically important that we on the community side are brought into this equation so we can say to people, 'whether you have access to broadband is not your decision. That train has already left the station. The decision is whether you're going to be a part of it or let it pass you by.' "

Also at the meeting, Chairman Keith Burdette noted that council member Mike Friloux had resigned. Burdette said Acting Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin is expected to eventually name a replacement. Council member Lee Fisher asked that the meeting minutes reflect the council's gratitude for Friloux's service.

Burdette promised to hold meetings on a more regular basis and said financial and committee reports will become a regular part of each meeting.

Contact writer George Hohmann at busin...@dailymail.com or 304-348-4836.

COMMENTS