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February 24, 2011

 Broadband council skewers national map as incomplete

By Eric Eyre

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- State officials sharply criticized a federal "National Broadband Map" project Thursday, saying West Virginia's mapping data was inaccurate and outdated.

The interactive map -- released last week by the U.S. Department of Commerce -- is designed to show high-speed Internet availability in every state. The broadband map of West Virginia is mostly blank, something that took members of West Virginia's Broadband Deployment Council by surprise.

"We were a sea of white with a few lines of red," said state Commerce Secretary Keith Burdette said Thursday. "It clearly showed an absence of broadband for most of the state."

An official with the state Geological and Economic Survey, an agency putting together a separate map of West Virginia's broadband coverage, said the national map was incomplete and used year-old data.

"It is not accurate," said Mike Hohn, who directs the state survey agency. "It doesn't reflect the latest information."

The Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications Information Administration (NTIA) has touted the mapping project as "the first public searchable nationwide map of broadband Internet availability." The agency said the map, interactive website and data will help bolster broadband availability throughout the United States

Not so, said Hohn, who described the federal website as "primitive."

He said the federal agency used outdated West Virginia data for the national broadband map, even though state officials had furnished more recent data sets. The website also has an interactive tool that ranks West Virginia last in the nation for Internet speeds and broadband technology.

"What NTIA did was a good model of what not to do," said Hohn, who has called the NTIA to complain but has yet to receive a response. "We've been told they're getting calls from many states.

The state Geological and Economic Survey -- with help from a consultant -- plans to complete its own West Virginia Broadband map by March 31. Hohn said most telecommunications firms in the state are providing accurate data for the project. "Our site will be better," he said.

Also at Thursday's meeting:

• Council members accepted the resignation of board member Mike Friloux, who stepped down this week after the Gazette reported that he has held a council seat illegally since 2008. Friloux, a Citynet executive, was appointed to serve as the council's "general public" member, a position that requires West Virginia residency. Friloux lives in Tulsa, Okla. Earlier this week, he said he believed he was representing Citynet and other telecommunications providers on the council.

• Burdette said the state Health Care Authority, Department of Education and Secretary of Administration missed an Oct. 31 deadline last year to submit annual reports about broadband initiatives. State law mandates that the agencies submit the reports to the council. Only higher education officials turned in a broadband report last year.

Burdette also want to establish council procedures to distribute grant funds for broadband

projects. The Legislature allocated $5 million to the council in 2008. The broadband council has spent about $400,000 from the account.

• The Rev. James Patterson of the Central Appalachia Regional Network urged broadband council members to take steps to promote the benefits of broadband.

"If we put it out there, and people don't purchase it, then we have a problem," Patterson said.

The state must ensure that low- and moderate-income families can afford high-speed Internet, he said.

"We see broadband as a fundamental communication right," Patterson said. "If you don't have it, you're going to continue to be isolated."

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