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Organizations endorse state broadband project



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Dec. 15--An organization that advocates for rural people and a Charleston think tank want the West Virginia [Broadband](#) Deployment Council to endorse the state's \$126 million broadband deployment project.

The Central Appalachia Regional Network and the Charleston-based West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy took the position at a press conference Tuesday, on the eve of a Broadband Deployment Council meeting.

The position further isolates Jim Martin, an outspoken critic of the way the state plans to spend federal stimulus dollars to deploy broadband.

The state has said its project will connect 1,064 community anchors like libraries and government offices. But Martin, the president and chief executive officer of Citynet, contends the project will only benefit Frontier Communications Corp.

Frontier has said it will abide by all of the federal requirements and the state's contract to fulfill the goals established by the federal government.

In March Citynet and several other [telecommunications](#) providers asked the Broadband Deployment Council to put a hold on the state's project. The council has not done so.

In September Martin asked Larry Strickling, who heads the agency that awarded the federal grant to the state, to suspend the grant. Instead, earlier this month Strickling reaffirmed his agency's support of the project. Acting Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin hailed the support and said its acknowledgement of the state's compliance "allows us to continue to move forward."

Martin and Frontier have been offered 20 minutes each at today's council meeting to explain their positions.

"We're not concerned about the spat between [telecommunications companies](#)," the Rev. James Patterson said at Tuesday's press conference at the Capitol. Patterson is a member of the executive committee of the Central Appalachia Regional Network, which is comprised of 22 organizations in six

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"We're concerned about affordable, high-quality broadband," he said. "If it is going to happen, it will depend to a large degree on the Broadband Deployment Council."

Patterson noted that state law calls for the council to sunset at the end of 2011. "We would support that the council be extended at least three years and maybe be considered to be a permanent entity," he said. "That's because of the importance of broadband."

During his first term, former Gov. Joe Manchin pledged to make broadband available throughout West Virginia by 2010. It is estimated that 20 percent of West Virginia households still do not have access.

Patterson said the fact that governments and private companies plan to spend almost a half-billion dollars on broadband deployment in West Virginia over the next few years provides the state with "an unprecedented, one-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

Paul Miller, an analyst with the West Virginia Center on Budget & Policy, said the Charleston-based think tank agrees with Patterson's organization.

"We urge the Broadband Council to formally adopt the state Commerce Secretary's \$126 million project," he said. Miller also said that the life of the council should be extended and he said vacant positions on the council should be filled.

In addition, Miller urged the council to fulfill a legislative mandate to write guidelines for organizations that seek funding for broadband projects and to actually deploy a project in an underserved or un-served area.

Also, Miller said the council should:

- Modify its definition of broadband to conform with the Federal Communications Commission's definition.
- Enforce requirements that state agencies file periodic reports on broadband.
- Stimulate demand for broadband through public outreach and education programs.

Miller said that over the long term, the state should create a permanent office of broadband development; provide tax credits to encourage companies to serve underserved or un-served markets; and regulate broadband like a public utility.

Retired Cabell Circuit Judge Dan O'Hanlon, who attended the press conference, identified himself as vice chancellor for technology at the Higher Education Policy Commission and as the new director of WVNET -- the state entity that provides technology services to the Legislature, public schools and universities, and other state government bodies.

"I believe your short- and long-term solutions are visionary," O'Hanlon told Patterson and Miller. "I believe you've brought the focus back to rural West Virginians and their needs."

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