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The Case For Wireless Broadband

By Sarwar A. Kashmeri

For the Valley News

New Hampshire and Vermont plan to provide high-speed Internet service -- broadband -- to 100 percent of their citizens by 2010. This is a laudable goal. With the region's rural and mountainous terrain, however, providing continuous broadband coverage throughout the two states will be a tough problem to solve. The problem today is: islands of connectivity surrounded by dead zones.

“In this business we need to think about building a matrix that covers entire communities. You cannot think about one community alone,” Tom Murray, commissioner and chief information officer of Vermont's Department of Information and Innovation, told me.

These are important questions for businesses operating in the Twin States, but they are critical questions for businessmen and businesswomen who might choose to live in our region and provide services nationally, or even globally. Ditto for the members of the “creative economy,” who are especially important for rural areas.

“We have had several people tell us that a number of house sales in the Upper Valley are pending based on whether we can get broadband to their houses,” Bob Jacobson, president and founder of Lebanon-based WaveComm, told me.

Jacobson said he knows of people who have moved because they could not get broadband in their towns. WaveComm is one of a half-dozen small businesses that have begun to tap into the emerging wireless-broadband business.

But making the Upper Valley into one, seamless broadband service area is not a simple project because the terrain and sparse population make it uneconomical for cable and telephone companies to justify installing equipment for broadband in many towns and villages. Increasingly, the solution is to use wireless technology to connect rural hamlets to the Internet.

The Vermont Council on Rural Development, through its Rural Broadband Project, helps communities quantify their broadband demand and then acts as a go-between with broadband providers to focus the community's efforts to plug into the Internet. Laura Duey is one of the council's Internet experts and has worked with 30 rural communities on broadband projects.

“Through VCRD's efforts, over half of them have actually been successful in getting broadband, and another quarter are works in process,” she told me. Underscoring the importance of wireless broadband to the region, she said, “In all but one case, it was the wireless solution that made it work out.”

Wireless broadband uses radio signals to connect houses to the Internet. Radio transmitters and receivers mounted on the house communicate with similar equipment on high ground to provide the connection. It is line-of-sight technology, and regionwide provision of broadband in the Upper Valley would mean erecting towers on mountaintops, ridge lines and other high-ground locations.

Putting up towers of greater than 20 feet requires local approval. In Vermont, this means colliding with the requirements of Act 250, which can “slow down the approval process by months, if not years,” Jacobson said. “It is time-consuming and a real obstacle to expanding broadband coverage in Vermont.”

Jacobson said he believes parts of Act 250 should be revised to factor in the economic impact of not having broadband. On the other hand, in New Hampshire, “the tower permits can take anywhere from days to two weeks,” he says.

Vermont state Rep. Alison Clarkson, who represents Windsor and Reading, supports a review of Act 250 to see if parts of it should be updated to make it easier to deploy technology in Vermont. While recognizing that Vermont's landscape is unique in the country, and that tourism is the second-largest revenue producer in the state, “we need to create a win-win situation by creatively marrying technology to the environment,” she said. “Act 250 is a great foundation for Vermont, but if we need to review pieces of it, I would be in favor of that.”

“We do support an update of the Act 250 statute to encourage the deployment of this critical infrastructure,” Murray told me. “The governor and the administration introduced language this past session in S.316 that replaced the existing 20-foot trigger with more reasonable language,” he said.

Duey told me about two other issues that need illumination: “People will still come to me and ask why they need the Internet,” she said. But more important are the financing issues involved in the provision of broadband by wireless. “Most of the wireless providers that have sprung up in the region are small companies with around 10 employees. It is a real stretch for them to put out the money for the equipment that wireless requires, and pay their regular overhead,” she told me. She said she believes the capitalization issue is a much bigger obstacle than Act 250 and other local permit requirements.

Duey reminded me that the government funded rural electrification to make sure those last few houses at the end of the electric line were connected to the power grid. “Why not do the same for the small wireless broadband providers?” she asks.

I will continue discussing the financial and Act 250 issues in my next column.

Sarwar A. Kashmeri of Reading, Vt., advises corporations on communications and marketing strategy and is a fellow of the Foreign Policy Association. This twice-monthly column explores the Upper Valley's “business climate,” focusing on the issues and conditions affecting the region's economic health. Kashmeri can be

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