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Upper Valley Broadband: Your Opinions

By Sarwar A. Kashmeri

For the Valley News

That the spotty availability of broadband is an important and urgent concern for many Upper Valley residents came through loud and clear with your feedback. More of you wrote to me on this issue than on any other that I have covered in the year and a half that this column has existed.

I would like to share some of your thoughts in this wrap-up column on broadband.

Officials in both Vermont and New Hampshire are keen to provide universal broadband coverage throughout their states by 2010.

My mail reflected frustration on this score.

“I am not sure I can wait until 2010,” Monte Clinton of Etna wrote. “I am currently making two to three trips a week to Hanover’s Howe Library to use their broadband for my lecture and consulting work. It is amazing how high-speed Internet has become critical to business, education, health, safety and general communication.”

This column focuses on business, economics and jobs, and I hammered away at the importance of broadband in these areas. But there are other equally important reasons for ensuring wide availability of broadband, as you reminded me.

“I feel that every community should be enabled with high-speed Internet,” Enfield’s Gipsy Wheeler wrote, “even if it’s just for home use: teenagers, disabled workers who must work from home (like me), or even grade-school kids -- who, in my opinion, are the most important persons of all, the fountainhead of intelligence, as it were. Those grade-school kids will soon be in high school and then college, and before you know it ... they could be the future leaders of our political systems and our leading industries. If you leave out these young people, you might as well close the book NOW!!!”

“Always-on true broadband is a bit like telephone service in that the more universal it is the more powerful it is,” Tom Summerall of Hanover wrote.

“If the grandkids have it but grandma doesn't, then a huge range of services, from video-phones, video sharing, etc. are not allowed to spring up in the marketplace. The government in the past understood this about telephony, but doesn't seem to get it about broadband.”

Summerall made another point that may be of interest to real estate brokers in the Upper Valley. “When my wife and I moved to the Upper Valley in 2001, it was almost impossible to find a house for which the availability of broadband was determinable. This situation, which amazingly is still the case for most houses out of the immediate DSL radius of Hanover, is very interesting from a Realtor's point of view. It seems to me that whether a ‘broadband’ connection is available for a house, and if so what type, would be a valuable/necessary piece of information in the 21st century American real estate market.”

Broadband, in my opinion, needs to operate in a free market and be self-sustaining. How to get there in a rural environment and how taxpayers support the process is an ongoing national debate.

“Of course!” wrote John Karol from Orford. “The question is why federal, state and local officials aren't making it happen. Throughout our nation's history, public funds have been used to support commerce -- e.g., to underwrite the canal systems that opened the Midwest to world trade, to electrify rural areas, and for our interstate highways. It is shameful that the United States ranks 16th internationally in the adoption of broadband.”

Doug Wise from Hanover went right to the point. “You'd asked if I support the use of tax dollars to help expand broadband coverage, and do I believe this is a national issue? My answer is ‘Yes’ and ‘Yes.’ ”

“Broadband should have capital made available to it much as rural electric co-ops did,” wrote Henry Swayze of Tunbridge.

“A child growing up in an underserved community should have the same basic opportunity to excel in the world as one from a well-served community. It is a waste of our human resources not to find a way for all who wish to become computer literate to have equal access to the Internet (through) a high-speed connection. Having said all this, if the feds are not acting, then state and local governments should.”

It was a pleasure to receive your e-mails. I can tell you from personal experience that the powers that be in both Vermont and New Hampshire are well aware of the broadband deficit in the Upper Valley and beyond.

My suggestion for those of you who care about this issue, especially those who are still unable to plug into the modern world, is to show up at town meetings, talk to your town managers, and write the governors of your state.

They are already tuned in, but it never hurts to turn up the volume.

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 reached at skashmeri@aol.com.

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