

Expanding broadband in state is worthy goal

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Tennessee needs to be connected, and Connected Tennessee is aimed at making sure it happens.

Connected Tennessee is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving high-speed Internet and video access to state residents, and it will help Tennessee keep pace with the world's global economy. The organization will be responsible for developing a statewide plan to expand broadband availability to underserved areas.

Broadband, also called high-speed Internet, is not widely available in the state. A task force reported in January that one in four households use it. The state ranks 37th in the nation in usage.

The task force's report was clear on the importance of broadband, finding that "broadband service is essential to the future of Tennessee's economy, the health of our citizens, and the education of our children."

Connected Tennessee will be modeled after a similar program in Kentucky that raised broadband availability by 90 percent there.

"By following what Kentucky has done, we can immediately identify areas underserved and take steps to fill those gaps," state Sen. Roy Herron, D-Dresden, said in a statement. Herron is co-chairman of the task force.

Broadband has been compared to rural electrification in the 1930s and the development of the interstate highway system in the 1950s. Both are credited with modernizing rural America.

Connected Tennessee is tasked with laying a framework for state broadband service, which the state does not have now. Stacey Briggs, executive director of the Tennessee Cable Telecommunications Association and a member of the broadband task force, said the Competitive Cable and Video Services Act that affects franchise agreements that telecommunications companies operate under in the state does not address broadband.

Briggs said Connected Tennessee's first step will be to contact leaders in each county to identify needs, create a detailed state map of broadband availability, and then

educate consumers. Broadband is available via cable and phone lines, satellite link or wireless connection.

While access to broadband is an issue in some areas, spokesmen for both AT&T and Knoxville cable provider Comcast note that broadband is important and will benefit consumers.

AT&T is backing legislation that would allow it to enter the cable TV business with a statewide franchise. The bill is a top issue in Nashville, with cable companies and local governments lined up against it.

Modern technology can help make a difference in how its users relate to the world and by using the vast amount of information available on the Internet.

All Tennessee residents deserve access to technology that will connect them to that modern world before technology leaves the state behind.

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