

Here's My Opinion

Broadband Access: Building Main Streets, Mainstream Economies

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It goes without saying that broadband high-speed internet is changing the way Americans live their lives. It's almost hard to remember how many of us got by without it. With access to broadband, we can easily sell a car, rent an apartment, look for a job, read the news, or manage a business. The advantage of the broadband network is that it can connect you to the rest of the world on your schedule, at your convenience, and *almost* anywhere ... that is, unless you live in rural America.

Today too few rural Americans take advantage of the opportunities broadband provides. Only half of rural residents subscribe to broadband – compared to 65 percent nationwide – because too many communities in rural America don't have adequate access to broadband infrastructure.

Simply put, building a broadband infrastructure is critical to creating jobs and economic opportunity in rural America. With investments in broadband we are fostering innovation and bringing America's rural communities into the digital age. A young person doesn't have to move to the nearest city to make a living. He or she can create, develop, and run a business at home, in rural America, and be successful. A young parent can work and raise a family and still connect with business partners across the country or around the world. With new or enhanced broadband access, the door to economic growth is open.

When broadband access reaches into rural communities:

- farmers and ranchers will have up-to-the-minute commodity and weather information to make the best

decisions for their operations.

- schools can expand limited course offerings through distance learning – both advancing education and better preparing students to compete in the 21st century economy.

- first responders will have information they need to keep their communities safer.

- and rural health care will improve, as medical specialists will be able to use tele-medicine to provide advanced diagnosis for patients or to consult with colleagues at other hospitals.

At the Department of Agriculture, we are focused every day to create thriving rural communities where people want to live and raise families. We want every parent and grandparent in rural America to be able to look their child or grandchild in the eye and tell them that their home town has the economic opportunities necessary to offer them a bright future.

The Obama Administration recently announced investment in 66 new Recovery Act broadband projects nationwide, the second round of funding for broadband infrastructure from President Obama's Recovery Act. Thirty-seven of these new projects will help expand broadband access in rural America. These projects will not only directly create over 5,000 jobs up front, but also spur economic development in some of the nation's hardest-hit communities, creating jobs for years to come.

These funds will put people to work constructing new facilities, erecting towers to transmit signals and high-speed broadband services installed in homes, businesses and community education, safety, and public health

centers. But the investments will also foster long-term economic growth. The \$7.5 billion provided by the Recovery Act to help expand broadband will benefit tens of millions of Americans and over 685,000 businesses, 900 healthcare facilities, and 2,400 schools in all 50 states.

We will see the impact of broadband locally when the Northeast Louisiana Telephone Company moves forward with a project to expand into more rural areas of Louisiana by replacing its current copper network with buried fiber optic cable that will give their customers the opportunity to access high-speed internet, digital TV service, and expanded telephone service.

President Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 into law with a vision of knowing it will help America. In addition to the jobs it will create and save in Louisiana and across the country, it will stimulate the national economy. In the longer term, it is the foundation for sustainable growth and will keep us competitive within the global economy.

(Editor's Note: Clarence W. Hawkins, the Louisiana state director for U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development, is the former mayor of the City of Bastrop and a LMA past president. Appointed to his current position by the President, he oversees the administration and delivery of USDA Rural Development programs in Louisiana.)

Planning for Progress

Getting the right "money magnet"

Smart planning attracts funding for communities

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Attracting public and private investment is one of a municipal leader's most important jobs, since it affords cities and towns the chance to launch new initiatives or to bring long-awaited projects to completion. However, as critical as these funding opportunities are, it's not uncommon to wait until the last minute to prepare a proposal or to pitch an investor. There's a better way to go after funding, and that is to *stay* prepared.

Strategize for readiness

Just like disaster or crisis preparation, in which we create a set of strategies that will help us endure business interruption scenarios, we should live in a state of readiness for possible funding. How do we do this? By taking the time to create dynamic community master plans, and to prioritize the steps required to implement them. Too often plans sit on shelves, and fail to attract the funding necessary to get them off the ground.

Instead, a community master plan with a thoughtful implementation strategy provides the right "magnet" for funders. A good plan is fresh, relevant, and shows that a city has a dream and an idea about how to get there. It demonstrates an awareness of the resources and the partners required to bring physical improvements to fruition. It points out that a city is keenly aware of its own transportation infrastructure, economic development, housing, green space, and quality of life needs. It reveals that residents have participated in the future design of their hometown and collectively agree on the plan's content. It benchmarks where a city is now, and illuminates its ideal

five-, 10-, and 20-year growth trajectory. When a city has a master plan and all its accompanying research, it can attract state and federal grants and private investment more often and with greater success.

Go for goal-focused planning

Cities face urgent needs – often with limited resources – so it's tempting to minimize the importance of investing in a master "action" plan. However, a well-crafted plan is an effective, money-saving strategy. Without clear direction on transportation, housing, green space, and more, cities find themselves using a scattershot approach, burning through valuable staff time and resources to chase down funding that doesn't always help the city advance in the right direction.

Instead, a good plan provides a tactical approach. It should include a clear economic and resource development strategy that paints a realistic picture about how to fund the parks, waterfront pavilions, bike paths, and other items the community has requested. In most cases, funds will come from both public and private sources, like state and federal grants, and investment from developers or foundations which want to be on the front end of an exciting, innovative opportunity.

Work through key steps to reach goals

As cities work through the planning process, then seek funds for projects, they will rely on the plan to help them through four important steps:

- **The Vision.** The plan provides a crystal-clear answer

to a funder or investor's most important question: "What are you selling?"

- **The Deal.** Through the planning process, the city should have considered how to structure partnerships that protect its best interests and promote the vision of its citizens.

- **Stakeholder Support.** In attracting both public and private funding, it's crucial for investors to know that stakeholders – including merchants, landowners, residents, and public officials – are all behind the project.

- **Construction.** A city will have a better chance of construction staying on time and on budget if the plan includes an assessment of existing infrastructure, and if the partners, such as engineers, site planners, architects and others, share the overall vision.

Attracting funding is a marathon, not a sprint. It takes preparation and endurance. To borrow another metaphor, it's like water placed in a pipe droplet by droplet. Once it builds momentum, it flows, and will keep flowing as long as the structure is sound.

A good strategy is magnetic – it provides the structure needed to attract and maintain a steady flow of alternative funds for villages, towns, and cities to flourish.

(Editor's Note: Patrick C. Moore is co-founder and managing principal of the Moore Planning Group, LLC, landscape architects and site planners, with offices in Alexandria and Baton Rouge. The firm's website is www.mooreplanninggroup.com.)