

StarTribune

Broadband: The state's economic imperative

Article by: Margaret Anderson Kelliher and Dan Dorman
March 10, 2014

The two of us don't always see eye-to-eye. When we were both state representatives working on opposite sides of the aisle, we worked hard to find common ground. Now today, despite our political differences, there is one issue that we most definitely agree on — the need for high-quality broadband in every corner of our state.



Rick Nease • Detroit Free Press/MCT

Minnesota has long taken pride in topping numerous “best of” lists.

One recent study even found that Minnesota was the fourth-happiest state in the nation. Unfortunately, we aren't topping any lists when it comes to broadband. Minnesota ranks only 23rd in the nation in broadband service, and without a serious state investment we will continue to fall further behind.

This is not just about bragging rights. Statewide access to reliable, fast broadband technology is absolutely vital to our future. Data from Connect Minnesota found that about 71 percent of households in the state currently have access to wired broadband with download speeds of greater than 10 megabits per second, yet only 46 percent of households in Greater Minnesota have that kind of coverage. However, if 95 percent of Minnesotans could access top-quality broadband, it would have a \$1 billion positive impact on the state's gross domestic product, according to data from the Strategic Networks Group.

Business, agriculture, education and health care increasingly rely on the Internet, and that need is only getting more urgent. In order to compete not only with South Dakota but also with South Korea, Minnesota needs to make broadband a top priority. That is why we urge the Legislature and Gov. Mark Dayton to take a bold step to bring all of Minnesota into the 21st century by committing to widespread broadband expansion.

The Governor's Task Force on Broadband recently released its 2014 report. One recommendation was that the state should create and provide \$100 million in funding for a Broadband Infrastructure Fund, which would award grants or loans to providers to install broadband in unserved or underserved parts of the state. This one-time appropriation would be a solid start in addressing what is estimated to be a need of between \$900 million and \$3.2 billion in the state. We also believe the \$100 million fund is the best way to leverage private investments and other public resources that are needed for more significant progress.

The task force also recommended restoring the tax exemption on telecommunications equipment. Dayton has publicly stated his support for restoring the tax exemption, which was repealed in 2013; it would provide a much-needed boost in additional investments in broadband expansion.

In addition, we urge lawmakers to follow the task force's recommendation to create an Office of Broadband operating fund “to promote broadband use and adoption.” The fund would enhance the office's ability to address broadband concerns and implement programs that will help increase broadband access.

We are at a crucial turning point. We urge Dayton and the Legislature to commit to keeping Minnesota economically competitive by supporting broadband expansion. Without that commitment, our state will continue to fall further behind the rest of the nation and world.

Margaret Anderson Kelliher is president and CEO of the Minnesota High Tech Association, chairwoman of the Governor's Broadband Task Force and a former DFL speaker of the House. Dan Dorman is executive director of the Greater Minnesota Partnership and a former Republican state representative.

** This editorial also appeared in the Grand Forks Herald, Granite Falls Advocate Tribune, Hutchinson Leader, Winona Daily News, Brainerd Dispatch, Albert Lea Tribune and Pope County Tribune.*