

Strike up the broadband

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IN MANY of the nation's metropolitan areas, people race around the Web on broadband roadways built on cable, fiber optics, DSL, and wireless systems. In coffee shops or in the privacy of their own homes, users can shop, attend college, and run businesses.

But not everyone has equal access. Broadband users tend to be wealthier people who live in suburban and urban neighborhoods. Meanwhile, some 17 percent of Internet households still dwell in the slow world of dial-up, according to US Census figures. And while South Korea has the most widespread high-speed services, the United States is seventh on this list, according to a recent report from Akamai Technologies, an Internet server company.

Rather than accept this uneven playing field, a growing chorus is wisely asking the federal government to develop a national broadband policy to ensure that every resident and business has fast, affordable Internet access.

The Bush administration has developed a universal broadband policy, and it points to 2006 Federal Communications Commission data showing that 99 percent of the nation's ZIP codes have broadband.

But Massachusetts congressman Ed Markey has called the FCC's data "inadequate and highly flawed." And last month, Internet for Everyone, a new coalition that includes Google and the Consumer Federation of America, pointed out that only a third of homes with incomes below \$50,000 have a high-speed Internet connection, and nearly 20 million people don't have broadband access.

The local effort

Cities have tried to become high-speed Internet hot spots. Initially, Philadelphia cut a deal with EarthLink, an Internet service company, to build a citywide wireless system. But this deal, and those with other cities, fell apart when cash-strapped EarthLink pulled out.

Boston struck out on its own. Instead of a private partner, the city opted to have a nonprofit organization build a wireless system. But faced with technical and fund-raising challenges, the nonprofit has settled for slowly creating wireless neighborhoods.

Last month, the US Conference of Mayors issued a resolution, cosponsored by Mayor Menino, that calls for a national policy, arguing that like water, sewers, and transportation, broadband is a public necessity.

In the State House, Governor Patrick supported a \$25 million bond bill to expand broadband in underserved communities. Last month, the House passed the bill increasing it to \$40 million. And the Senate passed this bill last week.

A national plan

Local efforts are important, but they can't improve the nation's global standing. That's why a national policy is essential.

What would a plan look like? The free market on its own eventually may fill some service gaps; Verizon is already planning to bring high-speed service to 23 communities in Western Massachusetts, an area that Patrick identifies as underserved.

But some areas will need a bigger push. Approaches to consider include more government and nonprofit coordination with the broadband industry, which is investing billions of dollars in infrastructure. The policy could also seed public/private partnerships to put fiber optics in rural areas. And federal grants could fund more school-based programs that put low-income students on the Internet's fast track.

Learning to drive

Education is essential. More people and institutions need the skills and motivation to use broadband. Nonprofits are providing training. And cities and states are offering e-government services that should attract people. But more should be done to target nonusers. With broadband use, for example, companies might hire more disabled workers who could telecommute.

Markey is proposing a sound first step. He has filed a bill that would require federal officials to map broadband access in greater detail. Once broadband gaps are visible, they can be filled. This kind of congressional action would provide a nationwide economic stimulus of \$134 billion a year, according to a study done by Connected Nation, a Washington nonprofit that promotes broadband and ran a broadband expansion project in Kentucky.

As more and more business and government activity moves online, those with poor access are falling further behind. The mayors are right: Broadband should be as common a public good as highways - not a perk for wealthier residents. ■