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Guest opinion: FCC plan a rural-urban digital split for Iowans

By DAVE DUNCAN
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Making robust broadband networks available to all Iowans is something we should all agree is a good idea.

However, you may not if you work for the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which is promoting a plan that creates an urban-rural "digital divide" in Iowa.

Last spring, the FCC released its "National Broadband Plan" (NBP) for public comment. The NBP was designed to ensure ubiquitous broadband coverage across America. The details of the plan show it will fall far short of that goal. Business and community groups have argued the NBP will stifle broadband upgrades in many rural areas and discriminates against small businesses. So far, however, the FCC is not listening to these pleas.

Broadband is our business. Iowa's locally owned and operated, independent telecom companies have deployed basic broadband to nearly all their customers. More than 50 Iowa-based providers have deployed advanced fiber-to-the home networks in more than 80 communities. But Iowa is far from achieving full build-out of advanced broadband networks.

It is not just about broadband.

We all use the interconnected network over which broadband is provided. Many Iowans are unaware the typical wireless call cannot be completed without using landline telephone networks that transport the call between the tower closest to the caller and the tower closest to the call recipient. Smart-phone web surfing depends on a robust "backhaul" landline network connected via landline to the World Wide Web.

It takes a lot of bandwidth to supply these needs, and it takes money to make the landline network "work."

The NBP will significantly restrict the cash flow available to locally owned and operated companies to finance network upgrades. Lenders are sounding alarms that existing loans used to build networks cannot be repaid under the NBP, and future investment capital will be restricted.

How? The NBP redirects tens of millions of dollars away from investment in telecom networks in Iowa to networks in other states by gutting the cost-recovery mechanisms rural carriers have used to serve sparsely populated areas. Providers use this revenue to build, operate, maintain and expand their landline networks vital to the communications landscape throughout Iowa. This is bad for all of Iowa. But it gets worse.

The drafters of the NBP engineered a permanent digital divide by supporting broadband networks in rural communities 25 times slower than those in urban areas. The plan sets target

broadband speeds by the year 2020 of 4 mbps (megabits per second) in rural areas, and sets a goal of 100 mbps speeds in urban areas.

It is hard to believe, but the FCC does not believe all Iowans should have access to the same type of broadband speeds.

Consumers, businesses, schools and hospitals in rural areas across Iowa are demanding broadband speeds of more than 4 mbps today, let alone 10 years from now. Setting a goal of "achieving" only 4 mbps will devastate any efforts of small towns to attract or maintain good-paying jobs and will prevent rural Iowans from enjoying the benefits of services using high speed Internet.

A recent survey of the International Economic Development Council shows fewer than 9 percent of respondents expect broadband speeds of 4 mbps to be adequate by 2013 (let alone by 2020) to achieve important economic development initiatives such as luring or retaining businesses, reviving business districts or providing training.

Across Iowa, school districts are requesting broadband pipes of 15 mbps, 20 mpbs and up so they can offer their students comparable curricula to those in urban areas.

The Iowa Utilities Board (IUB) regulates the telecommunications carriers in Iowa, and it is seeking input on the impact of the NBP on Iowa. The independent, locally owned and operated communications companies in Iowa continue to advocate that Iowa's rural consumers should receive comparable services to those enjoyed by urban customers. To get there, we'll need more cooperation from federal and state regulators if we are going to continue to provide the quality service Iowans have come to know and expect.

Dave Duncan is President of the Iowa Telecommunications Association