

A rural broadband perspective for 2016:

CTA members leading the way to connect Colorado's communities

Broadband access is critical to the health, safety, education and economy of all communities across Colorado. This one statement has become a focus for federal, state and local policy-makers, community and business leaders, health and education officials, and first responders.

For the Colorado Telecommunications Association (CTA) and its members, it's more than just a policy statement—it's a calling to provide exceptional broadband and telecommunications products to the diverse communities that we serve. We believe that expanded access to affordable, high-speed broadband is a top priority in the Information Age and that linking even the most geographically remote and economically challenged places in Colorado is imperative so that all may benefit from broadband.

According to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, nearly 99 percent of the U.S. population already has access to wired or wireless broadband. The gaps that remain, largely in sparsely populated, rural regions, are being closed daily by CTA's members, employees and partner companies.

Rural broadband access has been expanding steadily here in Colorado courtesy of the innovation and proven know-how of the seasoned private-sector and cooperative companies that make up CTA's membership. Our state's rural telecom firms, many of them generations old, know the needs of their communities and have not delayed in accepting the broadband challenge—and applying

some Western grit to getting it done.

Colorado Solutions

Consider the high-country community of Guffey, in southern Park County, where the residents and their only school long had practically no access to high-speed 'Net. Then, a CTA member South Park Telephone, the school and the Park County government came up with a plan. The effort raised funds and installed a broadband access point next to the school, allowing it and the surrounding community to pick up high-speed access that was beamed from one of the company's transmitters atop a nearby peak. That's just one example of a Colorado solution.

CTA members have stretched the Information Highway to all four corners of the Centennial State. Five different rural providers recently created the Colorado Fiber Network, a consortium that hosts gigabit-ready broadband on-ramps and connections throughout our state. The CFN's extensive network boasts redundant and reliable access to more than 63 school and library districts, more than 350 community anchor institutions, and hundreds of public and commercial buildings. The network provider interconnections in Denver, Colorado Springs, Pueblo, Durango and Grand Junction, as well as offering regional connections to our neighboring states.

That's a Colorado success, and there are many more from CTA's member companies.

Innovative partnerships like the statewide Colorado Fiber Network

Colorado's Rural Broadband Providers

Agate Mutual Telephone
Cooperative Association

Bijou Telephone Co-op

Blanca Telephone Company

Dubois Telephone Exchange

Eastern Slope Rural Telephone
Association, Inc.

FairPoint Communications Inc.

Farmers Telephone Company

Haxtun Telephone Company

Nucla-Naturita Telephone
Company

Nunn Telephone Company

Peetz Cooperative Telephone
Company

Phillips County Telephone
Company

Pine Drive Telephone Co.

Plains Cooperative Telephone

Rico Telephone Company

Roggen Telephone
Cooperative Company

Rye and South Park
Telephone Company

Stoneham Cooperative
Telephone Corporation

TDS Telecom

Union Telephone Company

Wiggins Telephone Association

Willard Telephone Company

FastTrack Communications Inc.

SECOM, INC.

and the Colorado Communications Transport fiber ring on the Eastern Plains allow individual providers to better serve their communities. As an example, PC Telecom in Holyoke in January became the first Colorado carrier to receive the NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association's "Gig Certified" award, recognizing rural providers for delivering gigabit broadband speeds and enabling technological innovation in its communities.

With this commitment to service and innovation, there's no telling how many more rural Colorado communities will soon be on the Gigabit Information Highway.

Role of Government Broadband Programs

CTA remains concerned about the top-heavy, bureaucratic model that state and local governments use when trying to play catch-up in the broadband market. Government, no matter if it's federal, state or local, needs to recognize its limited—but important—role in closing existing broadband gaps. That includes developing existing partnerships and cost-effective strategies to link the most geographically remote and economically challenged communities. Unfortunately right now, the government looks too often to itself as a potential broadband "company."

Instead of enticing state and local governments—and ultimately taxpayers—into making extensive investments in fiscally shaky, publicly owned broadband systems that have little or no experience in the marketplace, communities should look at the extensive work already being done by private providers and use public resources to fill the gaps needed to improve broadband access.

There are critical ways for government to partner with the private sector to provide service. However, CTA believes those should not include government financing, building, owning and operating a very capital intensive and complex network. To ensure more broadband access for rural Colorado, government can install conduit in roads when they are under construction to allow companies to install fiber optic lines, as one of the largest costs of deployment are trenching and burying lines. Additional support can come by limiting permit fees and local taxes, streamlining permitting processes and expediting tower siting.

Senate Bill 152

The CTA and its members believe that Senate Bill 152 should not be changed. It is working exactly as the legislature intended. If government is going to engage in a very expensive and complex business venture, citizens should be well informed about the risks. Colorado's unique system where local governments may enter the broadband market after

approval from local voters represents an important check-and-balance by letting taxpayers decide if they want their local government involved in the telecommunications business. It's a critical part of local government accountability that neither broadband advocates nor voters should want removed. In addition, SB152 elections are simply voters giving the authority to a local government to explore the idea of providing services. The additional votes that often are necessary to approve the public financing through bonds and debt to build these networks are also critical as part of the check-and-balance on local governments.

Lessons Learned: Eagle-Net Alliance

One does not have to look past Colorado to find an example of government-run broadband gone wrong. Colorado's Eagle-Net Alliance, a project that was federally financed, state-directed was practically rudderless from the beginning.

Eagle-Net's mission was initially to extend broadband to public institutions like schools in underserved rural Colorado communities, especially hard-to-reach mountain towns. The program instead wound up overbuilding existing fiber-optic networks already providing broadband to communities—while not even attempting to reach more remote and long-neglected places. Soon, it had burned through \$90 million of its original \$100.6 million federal grant with more than half its original mission undone. The federal government suspended the entire undertaking in 2012, and it resumed operation in 2013 only after being scaled back and partnering with a private company to find additional funding so the work could be continued.

To this day, Eagle-Net has yet to fulfill its mission or promise to link rural Colorado communities.

Bottom Line: Broadband Access Is Shared Goal

We all should agree that partnership, sharing vital resources and dialogue are critical to ensuring the shared goal of broadband access for all Colorado communities—no matter size, location or geographic challenge. We can do that by sharing our strengths and expertise and putting the right pieces together to build financially sustainable networks. CTA and its members look forward to working with everyone involved to find the most effective and efficient ways to connect communities to the Information Highway.

To do this right, it will take Colorado solutions and our spirit of partnership. CTA's member companies are the leaders in connecting their rural Colorado communities and are becoming the statewide leaders in providing rural broadband access. Let's work together to make broadband access a reality for all Coloradans.