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Why do fewer than half of new MDU buildings have fiber installed during construction? Easy. Few developers employ broadband specialists, but most watch TV or read business pages.

By Steven S. Ross / *Broadband Communities*

I(and broadband equipment vendors) have long been frustrated by the disconnect between **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** readers and the wider community of small real estate developers. Many articles in this issue highlight this disconnect. Our readers tend to be specialists or developers who employ specialists to get them the broadband they and their residents crave.

Specialists know that over the past decade, fiber has emerged as cheaper to install in new structures, cheaper to maintain and superior for meeting future needs.

But most developers, and the bankers who fund them, are not technically informed. They read nontechnical publications and newspaper business pages. They listen to political leaders and regulators who are ill-informed or shilling for special interests. It is not easy for publications such as this one, or for activist organizations, or for trade and professional organizations such as the Fiber Broadband Association or Multifamily Broadband Council to break through the clutter of profound ignorance. The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) is the world's largest technical organization and maintains the Ethernet standards, but it also finds itself with an inadequate voice among the powerful.

This was brought into focus by former White House adviser Steve Bannon, interviewed in the August 10 issue of *New York* magazine, who said, "Obama came in and had the stimulus, almost a trillion dollars, and nobody knows where the money went. ... It looks like the same place it was 10 years ago."

Bannon is entitled to his own (silly) opinion, but where were the magazine's fact checkers? The stimulus bill that passed in February 2009 had about \$700 billion. That is a lot of money but far short of a trillion. And just 1 percent of it, the \$7.2 billion spent on broadband, helped change our world in rather obvious ways.

But that comparatively small amount was targeted by Wall Street as a potentially mortal blow to existing carriers' business cases. The image they painted still exists today.

One easily traceable instance involved the phrase "cyberbridge to nowhere." The *New York Times* seems to have used it first, in a front-page article by David M.

Herszenhorn that ran February 2, 2009, before the final bill was whittled down. Said Herszenhorn, "Experts warn that the rural broadband effort could just as easily become a \$9 billion cyberbridge to nowhere, representing the worst kind of mistakes that lawmakers could make in rushing to approve one of the largest spending bills in history without considering unintended results."

Just a day earlier, public relations from Time Warner Cable had called me and used the same then-novel "cyberbridge" line. It referred to an aborted plan to build a \$400 million bridge to an Alaskan island with a tiny airport and 50 residents.

In an exchange of emails and a phone call, Herszenhorn insisted the phrase was original with him, and he bet me a bottle of wine that the money would be wasted or largely unspent. I never collected.

Emboldened by the newspaper's stand, former FCC economist Michael Katz told the American Enterprise Institute the money could be put to better use, perhaps combating infant deaths. He described rural areas as environmentally hostile and energy inefficient. "The notion that we should be helping people who live in rural areas avoid the costs that they impose on society ... is misguided," Katz said, "from an efficiency point of view and an equity one."

By March 1, the stimulus bill had passed, but Wall Street analyst Craig Moffett was fighting a rearguard action on National Public Radio. His appearance was introduced by James C. Goodale, former vice chairman of the Times: "Obama has allocated a \$7 billion stimulus to high-speed internet. Who is going to get the money? The cable companies? The phone companies? Will it do any good, or is it a cyberbridge to nowhere?"

Moffett has not changed his tune and is still a go-to for broadband quotes in the general business press. The Times itself rarely covers broadband at all, although almost every day it covers new products that use broadband. Specialists need more RESPECT. ❖

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