Improving the National Broadband Map

Telecom is a fast-moving field. Time for instantaneous updates of the National Broadband Map – and outreach to more people who can use it.

By Steven S. Ross ■ *Broadband Communities*

The Bandwidth Hawk does not have to tell too many of you about the National Broadband Map. More than half a million individuals have already visited the site, www.broadbandmap.gov. The map and its associated data sets – 20 million entries – detail wireless and wireline broadband service by more than 1,700 providers in every corner of the country.

The map's coverage and data quality are far from perfect. Use the map to search your address or ZIP code, and you are likely to see incomplete information and even some outright mistakes. Data online now is current to the end of 2010. The scheduled update, due in February, is likely to be late, incomplete or both.

Some states did a great job from the very start. The February 2009 stimulus program provided money for data collection, but some states, to save money on overhead or to mollify incumbents that wanted to provide as little data as possible, farmed the work out to consultants and got what they paid for. Some of those states, finally realizing that data on broadband availability is the bedrock of a modern economic development program, changed course, but their new data probably won't be incorporated into the map until this September at the earliest.

These shortcomings, however, have masked the real progress made and the real uses to which the data are already being put: generating jobs and stimulating new network builds by spotlighting opportunities and by reducing the cost of systems already in the works.

Indeed, the map is a game changer for government, real estate interests, broadband users, network builders and content providers:

- Private developers can use it to help site new residential and commercial construction.
- States and local governments can download maps and raw data to help set local broadband policies that aid consumers and economic growth.
- Educators can compare broadband availability with consumer interest to help target subsidies and computer training.
- Network builders can more easily see marketing opportunities.

Indeed, barely a week goes by without new uses being suggested. You'll hear about some at the Broadband Communities Summit, along with the pitfalls and the mechanics of downloading the raw data and complete maps.

Oddly enough, the main motivators for using the maps seem to be broadband or telecom regulators in state governments, along with technically adept citizens groups. Kentucky (where the mapping initiative started), Illinois, Massachusetts, California and Arizona have particularly active outreach programs and better-than-average data – data that is more current and more complete than what the national map offers. New York ZIP codes are among the top five searched, but that state's data is spotty, to say the least.

CONTINUOUS UPDATING

Why can't the national map be updated as each state generates new data? Why should there be a lag of nine months or more? True, some broadband providers operate in multiple states and do not want to be filing continually. Some systems are bisected by a state border, and the national map could look odd if one side of the border is current and the other is not.

In addition, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration at the Department of Commerce (which publishes the map) and the Federal Communications Commission (from which some data is derived) are not exactly overstaffed. But the job might require one extra person at NTIA. That's a small price for a big benefit.

Network providers are big users of the map, but providers of content and services are often surprised to learn of the map's existence – even if they're searching for networks with critical masses of high-bandwidth broadband users. Smaller real estate developers are also mainly out of the loop; state broadband offices don't even know they exist.

All the more reason to attend the Summit, April 24–26 in Dallas, and take the word back to your state. ❖

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