

Broadband Have-Nots Beware

The FCC stacks the deck against broadband in rural and poor urban districts.

By Steven S. Ross / *Broadband Communities*

Pardon my churlishness. I'm writing this column from the idyllic town of Brookfield, Vermont – idyllic except for unreliable cellular service and slow wireline service. I'm dependent on DSL from FairPoint (now owned by Consolidated Communications) courtesy of the small bed-and-breakfast where I am staying. In addition to the many working farms here, there are more than 10 premises per road mile – more than enough to justify even fiber broadband.

There is also a world-class restaurant, Ariel's. After October, however, the restaurant will likely be gone (its owners are retiring) and so will the main reason for coming to Brookfield. Tough luck for the small B&Bs and farmers renting rooms through Airbnb.

Each year, the Federal Communications Commission is required (under Section 706 of the 1996 Telecommunications Act) to report on the state of American broadband service. The 1996 law sets a goal of advanced, continually improving telecommunications for all Americans. To find out how the country is doing, the commission issues a notice of inquiry (NOI) with questions such as "Is 25 Mbps download, 3 Mbps upload speed good enough to be considered broadband?" The NOI is typically issued in August, and public input is due in September. The final report comes out in winter or spring.

This year, the FCC noted that although there was a 2016 NOI, no final report was issued in 2017. The implication is that the Obama Administration didn't do its job. The real reason, of course, is that the new administration didn't like what the last NOI found: Broadband is often inadequate.

No problem. The new NOI asks questions designed to prove that rural areas do not need more broadband and that the digital divide barely exists.

WHAT'S NOT IN THE NOI

The NOI does not ask a single question about business access. Economist Michael Curri, who has more data on this topic than anyone in North America, says three of four new U.S. jobs require reliable broadband access.

The NOI does not ask a single question about health care or emergency needs and barely touches on educational

needs. Though schools are moving toward electronic delivery of lesson materials (a cheaper, higher-quality approach than using paper textbooks, tests and homework assignments), the NOI does not ask about broadband in students' homes.

The NOI floats the idea that residential broadband can be wireline at 25x3 Mbps or wireless at 10x1 Mbps. Until now, the FCC has said residential needs include both wireline and wireless. The 2016 broadband report says four of every 10 rural residents lack broadband access of any kind.

The NOI does not ask whether there are significant barriers to deployment of wireline access, such as restrictions on municipal broadband in 20 states. (Isn't the Trump base rural?)

The NOI notes that many low-income urban households get by with cellphones only. It doesn't ask why, or whether this is a problem worth fixing, or what could be done to fix it.

The NOI appears aimed at justifying a finding that cellular service equals broadband. Even satellite service may be OK, too. To be fair, the 2016 NOI asked about satellite service as well. Satellite should be considered for a tiny fraction of customers way off the grid. But the way this NOI asks, almost any answer could justify it as a substitute for wireline. In previous years, satellite was considered an addition to wireline.

The Pew Research Center reports that 77 percent of U.S. adults have a smartphone, but only 42 percent of seniors do. Rural residents and urban poor skew older than average. Pew notes that almost 90 percent of those with college degrees have smartphones, but only 54 percent of high school dropouts do. All but 7 percent of households with annual incomes greater than \$75,000 have a smartphone, but fewer than two-thirds of households with less than \$30,000 annual income do.

Don't worry about responding to the NOI. Aside from the fact that the final report is probably already written, the comment period closes around the time you will be reading this on paper. ❖

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