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Serving the Underserved

New ideas are needed to get adequate broadband to rural areas.

Now that broadband is indispensable to daily life and three-quarters of U.S. households have broadband at home, it's hard to fathom that it is still unavailable in large areas of the United States. But according to FCC Chairman Ajit Pai, 39 percent of rural Americans lack adequate broadband access.

Billions in federal loans, grants and Universal Service Fund support have already gone into wiring rural areas, and billions more are headed that way. However, the scale of the need dwarfs the available resources, and the remaining unserved or underserved areas include many that are difficult to serve economically.

It's time for new ideas. Rural areas have already lost jobs and population because of poor broadband and will decline further if the problem isn't solved. Abandoning rural housing and infrastructure and building new facilities to accommodate migration into the cities and suburbs is far more expensive than just building broadband in rural areas. Taking care of those who stay behind is expensive, too – for example, the opioid epidemic has hit impoverished rural areas particularly hard. Rural despair was painfully evident in the 2016 elections.

SPECIAL FOCUS ON RURAL ISSUES

This issue of **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** features a special section on the problems of rural broadband. It covers a number of state, county and local efforts to tackle the digital divide through policy changes, public

broadband deployment and creative partnerships with the private sector.

In addition, Frank Odasz talks about the importance of meshing rural broadband with rural culture – and ending up with the best of both worlds. Getting the infrastructure right is critical, too, and two experts from Vantage Point explain why, even after the long-awaited 5G standard arrives, wireless will not be the answer to rural broadband prayers. (Spoiler alert: The answer is fiber to the home.)

Andrew Cohill emphasizes the importance of breaking the monopoly on infrastructure. His mantra, like that of the last FCC chairman, is “Competition, competition, competition” – and he shows that even a group of neighbors along a rural stretch of road can create a competitive counterweight to incumbent providers. Finally, Michael Curri demonstrates that the community benefits of broadband may be large enough (and, more to the point, predictable enough) to take to the bank. Rural communities can borrow against these benefits in a way that traditional private-sector providers could never do.

Note that the small city of Ammon, Idaho, makes not one but two appearances in this special section – and its technology director will make two appearances at the 2017 Summit. Clearly, Ammon is one place worth watching as a test bed for new ideas to solve the rural broadband crisis. ❖

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