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The Bandwidth Problem

What will it take to solve the problem?

The diversity of industry experts' perspectives always adds interest to writing – and, I hope, reading – the annual broadband forecast article (p. 40). Everyone sees the world from a unique angle, and each angle yields new insights.

Here's a statement from one of our expert panelists that set me thinking: "We've solved the bandwidth problem. The technology is there today; there's no reason you can't deliver enough bandwidth to make people very happy." The speaker is Richard Holtz, CEO of InfiniSys, a leading authority on designing technology amenities for multifamily housing. (As usual, he'll be sharing his wisdom at the Broadband Communities Summit in May; don't miss his presentations there.) Holtz is referring to multifamily housing in particular, and he adds that there are still plenty of other problems to solve, such as security.

Of course, he's correct. There are now multiple solutions for delivering happiness-inducing bandwidth in multifamily housing, all of which involve putting fiber close to users. One of the newer solutions, G.fast, is the subject of an article on p. 26. There are fewer solutions for single-family housing, but there are enough.

So what makes the statement surprising?

I'd guess that a sizable proportion of the public disagrees that "we've solved the bandwidth problem." That's because most people define the problem not in terms of whether a technical solution exists but in terms of whether they, personally, have access to bandwidth that "makes them very happy."

BEYOND TECHNOLOGY

Addressing today's bandwidth problem requires thinking about issues beyond technology. For example:

- **Affordability:** Even in urban, multiple-dwelling-unit environments, where the costs of delivering good broadband are relatively low, residents' income isn't always sufficient to cover these costs. In rural areas, the problem is far more severe. Businesses too often must choose between uprooting themselves and struggling to pay for broadband.
- **Education:** Property owners and state and local officials who are unaware of (or unsympathetic to) residents' broadband needs may stand in the way of broadband upgrades. In the long run, this strategy is self-defeating, but in the short run it harms residents.
- **The moving target:** The amount of bandwidth required to make people happy increases each year as the benefits of broadband increase. What looked like a good technical solution a few years ago may not look like one today. That means any true solution must be future proof.

Providers in the United States have made great strides toward modernizing their network infrastructure, and they continue to do so. But truly solving the bandwidth problem will require a national commitment to ensuring a world-class infrastructure. ❖

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