A Tale of Two Nations

A special section on rural broadband will help you prepare for the **Broadband Communities** Summit.

The divide between digital haves and have-nots has never been greater. About 40 million U.S. households – close to one-third of the total – now have access to FTTH services. (Fiber deployment, though it seems frustratingly slow to those still waiting, is far more rapid than the deployment of copper and cable networks, which took two to three times longer to reach the one-third mark.)

Tens of millions more have access to very good broadband – even gigabit service – through fiber-to-the-building or hybrid fiber-coax networks. Still more have access to broadband that meets the FCC's minimum standards. In fact, in large parts of the United States, residents take adequate broadband for granted and aren't aware that broadband access is still a problem for others.

Meanwhile, the have-nots fall further behind. Even if they have better service than they had last year or five years ago, they are increasingly disadvantaged. For example, the fiber assets manager of Craighead Electric Cooperative Corporation, an Arkansas co-op that is deploying FTTH, describes (p. 62) what underserved families in his service area must do – drive long distances, keep children up late – to make sure homework is completed each evening.

Many digital have-nots are in low-income neighborhoods of metropolitan areas that are otherwise well-served. This urban divide continues to reinforce the cycle of urban poverty. The other large group of have-nots, and the most difficult to address, are in rural areas.

RURAL BROADBAND

The Rural Telecommunications Congress, an organization that advocates for rural broadband, has put together sessions on rural broadband for the **Broadband Communities** Summit for a number of years. To preview the rural track at this year's Summit, RTC members contributed several articles to this issue.

On p. 34, Drew Clark, president of the RTC, discusses the ReConnect program, included in the March 2018 omnibus appropriations bill, and the Farm Bill broadband programs. Both should provide much-needed injections of funds to rural areas, but the funds come with challenging restrictions. See the Bandwidth Hawk (p. 22) for ideas about how to overcome those restrictions.

Eric Ogle of Magellan Advisors explains (p. 36) why local companies, especially electric utilities, offer the best hope for rural broadband – and gives advice about the types of partnerships likely to move these projects forward.

Finally, Michael Curri of Strategic Networks Group argues (p. 40) that, to take control of their digital futures, rural communities need to develop a vision of what they want broadband to do for them. Without an overarching vision, he says, any policies will be piecemeal and reactive.

Don't miss the Summit – it's in Austin again this year, April 8–11. ❖

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