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Connected Tennessee works to get Sumner County wired

Group seeks to provide high-speed Internet to residents

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Sumner County Director of Communication and Information Technology David Pigna, shown at his office, has access to high-speed Internet service. Connected Tennessee, a statewide, nonprofit organization, is looking at ways to provide more broadband Internet access to all of Sumner County. (Jeremy Johnson/Sumner County Staff)

Increasing the ability for all Sumner County residents to have high-speed Internet access is the goal of a new public-private partnership.

The statewide nonprofit group, Connected Tennessee, wants to work with Sumner County leaders to identify the area's strengths and weakness in an effort to expand broadband Internet access.

Increasing broadband access will help not only individual residents, but could become an important tool in education, government and economic development.

"What we are looking at in places like Sumner County is how can broadband improve education, government and business and

industry. We are asking them to determine what do we want to do with it in a couple of years," said Michael Ramage, who heads Connected Tennessee.

Broadband is a term used primarily to describe high-speed Internet access. A broadband Internet connection is capable of providing an integration of voice, data, video and other applications over a single network.

Gallatin Economic and Community Director Clay Walker said an inventory of broadband accessibility and demand in Sumner County could be an invaluable recruiting tool.

"That's why we need this. This is one of the things we've needed for a long time. Technology infrastructure is a great unknown. We struggle with it. Not only with knowing what you have but what you don't have," he said.

Walker added his agency has limited information about how much broadband service could be provided within his city.

"You have to know what you have and what companies you are trying to recruit need," he said.

Expanding broadband capability throughout the state will give Tennessee a leg up in the competition to recruit technology driven businesses into the state, Walker contended.

Sumner County Director of Communication and Information Technology David Pigna agreed.

He pointed to studies done by the Sumner County Technology Committee and Hendersonville Tomorrow to back up his belief that increased broadband access aids economic recruitment.

But, Pigna added those same studies have found roadblocks to expanding broadband service beyond the county's major cities, including the cost to provide services to outlying areas.

Most of Sumner's cities do have high speed Internet access. It is in the less populated areas of the county where the ability to hook on to the service is troublesome.

"Based upon the recent analysis by a Connected Tennessee... the broadband availability in Sumner County is quite expansive in most of the highly populated areas. But, that does not mean that it is available to every home, or to every business.

Those areas of the county that are the least densely populated have little, if any, access to these services," he said.

It will take increased demand to bring the service to those less populated areas of the county, Pigna added.

"As applications that target specific needs for broadband services continue to expand to provide added value to the business or the consumer, the willingness to pay for those services will follow. These new applications that are cost justified will provide a stimulus for the expansion of broadband offerings in Sumner County and Tennessee," Pigna said, adding technology infrastructure takes second place to several other factors when companies are looking to locate in a given area.

"I believe the basic core values such as good schools, access to good transportation, quality medical care and safe neighborhoods will always be fundamentally important when courting business entities to move to our county," he said.

According to Ramage, while improving technology infrastructure in order to recruit new businesses to the state is a big part of his organization's mission, another just as important goal is improving technology literacy and usage.

He points to statistics gathered by his group that shows one in three Tennessee businesses does not have Internet in their operation.

"A lot of people who say 'I don't need broadband,' don't realize how it can impact their business. There is a business over in Dresden that had been in business for over 100 years. They now do 90 percent of their business over the Internet. The Internet is keeping their business going. And we're hoping that by sharing those success stories we can get more businesses to look at using the Internet. So it's not just about expansion but improving what is already here," he said.

The Connected Tennessee director also believes by expanding the service and usage, it will become more affordable.

"The more people that want it and the more it is built out, the cheaper it becomes. DSL is cheaper today than it was 10 years ago because more people use it," he said.