

Why Should We Care about Broadband?

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Introduction

“The simple answer is that rural communities will be economically crippled without broadband access. That’s the long and the short of it.”¹

- Sharon Strover, Director
Telecommunications and Information Policy Institute
The University of Texas at Austin

What do you think of when you hear the word “broadband?” It might be the word your Internet provider uses in describing the tier of service you pay for each month. Maybe you think of your cell phone company advertising high-speed broadband to your phone. Or perhaps, one of your kids is complaining about the lack of high-speed broadband to (choose any of the following) stream the latest YouTube video, compete in online gaming or maybe even complete their homework.

The word “broadband” refers to any technology that transmits data across the Internet at high speeds. “Basic broadband,” as defined by the FCC in 2010, is download speeds to your computer of 4 Mbps and 1 Mbps upload from your computer. These speeds would probably be good enough for your favorite YouTube video, but HD video can takes speeds up to 10 Mbps. (See Chapter Two, “Broadband 101”² for background about broadband, Mbps and more.)

Your provider might advertise, “Fast connection speeds with choices up to 40 Mbps. Upload speeds up to 5 Mbps in select areas.” The problem with these ads is that they are generic ads, aimed at national markets. For most rural areas, that phrase, “in select areas,” means that high speeds are not available at all to the average consumer. Most rural services fall in the 1.5 to 3 Mbps range, and in some areas, service might not be available at all. Many rural residents outside of towns have very limited choices, and sometimes satellite or dial-up access might be their only option to access the Internet.

Benefits of Access to High-Speed Broadband

There are many reasons high-speed broadband is critical for rural areas. Businesses who want to expand or relocate require access to affordable, high-speed services, not only to conduct business, but to recruit knowledge workers and stem the brain-drain that can hurt rural areas. Access also gives people the choice to live and work in rural areas. They can work from home, participate in distance education and conduct business around the world. In addition, many government services are now online, so reliable Internet access is a requirement of doing business with your state and local governments. High-speed broadband has become a basic utility for the 21st century, just like power, water and roads.

¹ http://www.utexas.edu/know/2011/04/08/strover_sharon_yonder/

² <http://www.chaffeecountyedc.com/EndUserFiles/31275.pdf>