OP ED: Rural Economy Enhancements Required to Move WV Forward

We hear it over and over that access to broadband is key to West Virginia’s future. As our state and other rural communities continuously struggle with connecting rural residents to the internet, President Trump and industry leaders are now exploring ways to bring “5G” to the United States. At the same time, rural states are struggling to bring basic services to the many valleys and hollows our citizens call home. These are the same services much of America can hardly fathom living one second without. Sadly, in rural America, living without high-speed internet is a simple reality.

A recent incident at my own home brought this issue full circle. While lying on my sofa one morning, I felt a prick on my shin. A sudden kick threw a bat into the air. Living in an old 1890s farm house near Blacksville, my wife Shirley and I are used to the critters that share our home. The mystery of how that bat ended up teeth deep into my leg we will save for another day.

After washing the wound site, I immediately went online to see what next steps should be taken, as well as how soon to seek professional medical care. Given the remoteness of our home, the closest medical services are a 45-minute drive to Morgantown. Long gone are the days of small-town doctors many of us remember. Thankfully, my research concluded treatment was not necessary immediately, so I could make that drive when convenient.

If I was not able to conduct such a quick search, the rational choice would have been to seek medical attention as soon as possible. Fortunately, my family can afford satellite service, my only choice for internet, but that is not the case for everyone. I wondered what one of the tens of thousands of West
Virginians without internet access would have done in a similar situation. This would mostly likely entail waking up the family and driving to the nearest emergency room. Not a convenient trip for those who enjoy remote living.

While waiting to be seen by a medical professional, I had the opportunity to dig further into our economic and broadband picture. Recent reports show that West Virginia’s economy is indeed improving, but much of that growth is found in fewer than 15 counties. The other 40 counties of this beautiful state have something to offer, but without access to broadband it’s nearly impossible to expect businesses to relocate to those areas. Even farming and agriculture-based businesses are more reliant today on social media and online marketing than just a few years ago.

Lack of access to broadband is not only a prohibitor to attracting new industry to areas but also a social well-being contributor. Many employees are unwilling to relocate to communities unless they have reasonable access to a quality education and healthcare. Both of these quality of life standards, because of tele-medicine and alternative forms of learning, are becoming more heavily reliant on broadband and will continue do so for the foreseeable future.

Looking past my “batty” situation, if our goal is to continue to provide services to rural areas and foster a better West Virginia, we will need to expand access to broadband and do it quickly. Our nation’s leaders are looking to modernize existing broadband infrastructure to help foster economic growth, as well as tap into emerging industries and markets. If our state cannot catch up to the rest of the nation, we once again look to be left behind.

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The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials who sits on the Board of Public Works.