

ASSOCIATED PRESS:

Rockefeller: Broadband infrastructure key for WVa

By TIM HUBER AP Business Writer
The Associated Press
CHARLESTON, W.Va.

Developing a strong broadband infrastructure is vital to West Virginia's future, U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller said during a statewide conference Monday.

Expanding broadband access across the entire state can transform education and improve health care and the state's economy, the West Virginia Democrat said during the West Virginia Broadband Summit in Charleston. During the event, Rockefeller announced an \$800,000 project to link Marshall University's Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine, St. Mary's Medical Center and Cabell-Huntington Hospital.

Currently, officials estimate 77 percent to 80 percent of the state has broadband access and the Federal Communications Commission says that ranks in the bottom five.

"This is, I think, profoundly unacceptable," Rockefeller said. "We've made progress, but we haven't made enough progress."

While Congress included \$7.2 billion for broadband projects in the \$787 billion federal stimulus bill, Rockefeller said West Virginia mustn't rely on the government. "The power lies with our people. They have to want it. They have to insist on it."

The Marshall broadband project is the first to come from an \$8.4 million federal grant awarded in December 2007. It's designed to allow Marshall and the hospitals to share information and give rural health centers remote access to their physicians and specialists.

"This is so important," Rockefeller said. "It's one of the geniuses of broadband."

Larry Malone, chairman of the West Virginia Telehealth Alliance, said the organization still has approximately \$8 million in federal grant money. Those funds will go toward upgrading more than 300 health care facilities so the new network can expand statewide, Malone said.