

DAILY MAIL:

Tuesday September 29, 2009

Rockefeller says U.S. on road to faster Internet

by George Hohmann
Daily Mail Business Editor

With \$7.2 billion in federal stimulus money he helped secure being deployed for broadband infrastructure, Sen. Jay Rockefeller proclaimed, "We have finally set out on the right road."

"But make no mistake: We are behind," Rockefeller said at a broadband conference on Monday at the Charleston Marriott. "Too many of our international counterparts have surged far ahead of us when it comes to broadband speed.

"In South Korea, the average download speed is five times faster than what is available here. In Japan, it is more than three times as fast. Consumers in these countries pay less for their speed than we do. That's the embarrassing part. We have our work cut out for us."

"Everybody deserves to have broadband," Rockefeller said. "You say some won't use it. OK. But their kids will. It's a basic part of our belonging to the future of this world. We've got to keep moving forward. Seventy years ago it was electricity. With the Rural Electrification Act, we met that challenge. The government was involved. That's OK.

"I never heard anybody call the interstate highways a socialist event," Rockefeller said, alluding to critics of the Obama administration. "Today we have to think about broadband the way we did earlier things. The spirit of universal service motivates all of us. We have to do it with the same unwavering commitment that was brought to electricity and highways. When we offer the tools of the digital age to the residents of rural America, we are providing empowerment."

Rockefeller described the federal stimulus as something "a lot of people love to hate, and a lot of people voted against. The government isn't taking everything over. Sometimes the government has to be the catalyst that gets things going."

About 20 percent of West Virginia households don't have access to broadband. That translates into thousand of households, Rockefeller said.

Furthermore, "An independent analysis of Federal Communications Commission data found that West Virginia is among the five states with the lowest broadband penetration rates," he said. "This is profoundly unacceptable."

The answer does not lie with government alone, the West Virginia Democrat said. "The government can be the seed that plants an idea," but "West Virginia has to make its own broadband future. The people have to want it and insist on it. I get few letters about broadband. There aren't enough complaints."

Rockefeller is chairman of the powerful Senate Commerce Committee, which oversees the federal government's telecommunications programs, agencies and regulators.

Kelley Goes also spoke at the conference. She repeated Gov. Joe Manchin's commitment that broadband access will be available to all West Virginians by the end of 2010.

Goes is secretary of the state Department of Commerce, executive director of the West Virginia Development Office and chairs the West Virginia Broadband Deployment Council.

She said she called on Internet providers to supply the state with good information for mapping purposes. "The state needs to be able to map and catalog its infrastructure so it can plan for the future," she said.

The federal stimulus money is being co-managed by two agencies - the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Utility Service.

Goes said the Rural Utility Service's definition of "remote" unfairly prejudiced West Virginia by classifying all but a tiny portion of the state as non-remote.

Lawrence Strickling, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's information administrator, also spoke. He said President Obama's innovation agenda, unveiled last Monday, "makes clear that innovation and investment are key."

The agencies managing the \$7.2 billion in stimulus money for broadband proposed three rounds of funding. Nationwide, more than 2,200 applicants asked for a total of \$28 billion in the first round. Strickling said about 80 applications were received for projects that would serve West Virginia.

First-round grants will be announced starting in November, with all first-round grants to be awarded by the end of the year, he said.

In light of the massive number and amount of first-round requests, the process is being reviewed and there may be only one more round of funding, Strickling said.

The executives in the agencies administering the program "are thinking hard about how to create the biggest impact with these broadband dollars," he said. Strickling suggested that telecommunications leaders who are considering writing second-round funding requests ponder several questions including who should apply and how many entities should join together in an application.

"Does the presence of private companies provide us some assurance that the budget for a project is reasonable, and that the partners have experience building these projects? So is a private-public partnership best? These are things you should think about," he said.

Nearly 150 telecommunications leaders attended the conference, which was organized by Rockefeller's Discover the Real West Virginia Foundation.