

“Senator challenges state to build network at summit”

By Fred Pace
Register-Herald Business Editor

Every generation in the history of the United States has experienced an infrastructure leap that fundamentally changed society, Sen. Jay Rockefeller told those at the Southern West Virginia Broadband Summit at The Resort at Glade Springs Monday.

“In the early and middle part of the 19th century, we saw the explosion of this country’s rail network. In the 20th century, we saw the emergence of the interstate road system. And for our generation, we have seen the development of broadband, which is fundamentally reworking the way we see the world and has opened enormous new vistas of business opportunities for our citizens, particularly in traditionally underserved areas,” said Rockefeller, D-W.Va., in his opening remarks at the summit.

Rockefeller challenged the entire state to build a comprehensive broadband network. “It will bring significant new economic and educational opportunities,” he said. Rockefeller told the gathering of local elected officials, business and technology leaders, and economic development leaders from all over the region that his goal is giving 100 percent of West Virginia businesses and homes access to broadband.

“West Virginia has geographic terrain challenges and each community’s broadband challenges are different,” he said. “There’s no one solution for this, instead we need a combination of companies building out their network and municipalities providing broadband directly to their businesses and households.” Rockefeller said 75 percent of the state’s population has access to broadband, high-speed Internet access. “According to the Consumer Advocate Division of the Public Service Commission of West Virginia, only 85 percent of American homes have high-speed telecommunications availability,” he said. “In West Virginia, only 75 percent of residents and businesses have access to broadband, a number that is significantly lower in southern West Virginia.”

A recent poll of 700 people in Wyoming, McDowell, Lincoln, Barbour, Clay and Webster counties by Alliance West Virginia showed that 71 percent said they owned a computer and 67 percent said they connected to the Internet with dial-up service. “America has fallen behind the world’s developed countries in terms of broadband availability and usage,” Rockefeller said. Rockefeller pointed to a recent report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development that showed the U.S. had dropped from 10th to 12th in the world in percentage of broadband usage.

Questions raised at the summit included, “How do you get broadband service to underserved areas in West Virginia?” and “Is rural broadband availability economically viable?”

Rockefeller said public-private partnerships may be the answer. “We should start considering what public-private partnerships we should form to achieve effective broadband deployment in our state, especially among southern counties,” he said. “We

need some economic incentives for these partnerships to work. We must take action because this technology is a necessity for our future.”

Hosted by the Discover the REAL West Virginia Foundation, the summit also included appearances by Third District Congressman Nick Rahall, D-W.Va.; Federal Communications Commission Commissioner Michael Copps; and Larry Irving, president of Washington’s Irving Information Group. “I hope that today will usher in a reconsideration of the possibility of next generation broadband deployment in southern West Virginia,” Rockefeller said. “My hope is that this summit will build on our commitment to further prosperity in southern West Virginia and lay the seeds for partnerships that could come to shape the technological future and economic framework of the region and the entire state.”