

To the Editor February 10, 2020

Broadband Internet for All

As background to this piece, I have spent much of my adult life working to bridge the Digital Divide of access to computers and Internet service. I did this by refurbishing many thousands of corporate surplus computers for use by schools, nonprofits, and low-income families. And by running a low cost dial in phone line Internet service to provide Internet access for many hundreds of families, and connect them to the Internet via a wireless broadband connection from a local ISP, and later with a DSL connection from a telecom provider.

But first a bit of more relevant history.

History is clear in that without a massive public investment, there would be no Internet. It is also clear that we now need a broadband plan would take the first steps towards returning the Internet to its rightful owners, the public. This will ensure that everyone can have reliable, high-speed broadband.

Right now, nearly half of Americans do not have an internet connection that meets minimum broadband speeds. Moreover, a staggering number of poor people of color do not have home internet access of any kind. Yet Americans are charged some of the highest prices for internet service in the developed world. These are all symptoms of a much larger, structural problem: the corporate capture of the pipes, wires, and other infrastructure that powers the internet.

H.R.3152 - Rural Broadband Initiative Act 114th Congress (2015-2016)

To amend the Rural Electrification Act of 1936 to establish an Office of Rural Broadband Initiatives in the Department of Agriculture because the Rural Electrification Act of 1936 helped bring electricity and telephone service to rural America, thus removing major barriers to the development of our rural economies. A lack of affordable broadband presents a similar barrier to the development of our rural economy. According to the FCC, 53 percent of rural Americans lack access to service delivering broadband speeds of 25 Mbps for downloads and 3 Mbps for uploads. High-speed broadband access helps rural communities compete and grow in our digital economy. **Died in Congress.** Legislation not enacted is cleared from the books.

Wisconsin Rural Broadband Efforts Largely Unnoticeable

In its first two years, the program has benefited just a few thousand households served by 14 Wisconsin service providers. Efforts to bridge rural broadband disparities fall well short of a solution for most outside of urban areas, according to Internet service providers and industry experts.

<https://www.govtech.com/network/Wisconsin-Rural-Broadband-Efforts-Largely-Unnoticeable-.html>

Despite billions of public dollars, some rural residents slog through slow internet

A spokeswoman for Madison-based TDS Telecom said it's difficult to say whether TDS would have expanded broadband service to rural areas without federal dollars.

https://madison.com/wsj/business/despite-billions-of-public-dollars-some-rural-residents-slog-through/article_a6d5f951-7937-5e37-b7dc-54b5fd88460c.html

TDS Telecom for example is currently in the process of providing upgraded fiber backbone to Wisconsin via the current Federal Rural Broadband Initiative. The plan covers the Madison and Wausau suburbs mostly in the central and western parts of the state, the least rural areas. This leaves the northeastern area out of luck, and gives our rural communities the choice of spotty cable service, slow expensive cellular service, or slow and even more expensive satellite service. <https://tdsfiber.com/build/> Sorry zip code 54214, no fiber for you! Except for the “*fiber to the telecom press releases*” we continue to see over and over for many decades now.

For many years, Broadband Internet supporters have attempted to reconcile the public interest in universal, high-quality broadband against the profit motives of Internet Service Providers (ISPs). They tried to tame their malfeasance but not break them up and leave their ownership and control of the Internet infrastructure intact.

It has now become clear that they are in fact responsible for the sorry state of broadband in this country, having received \$400 Billion in subsidies and discounts over the past century that they have not lived up to. We should now make them pay us back to fix it. The Book of Broken Promises <http://teletruth.org/> See also: America’s Broadband Heroes: Fixed Wireless Broadband Providers www.wispa.org.

It is now well past the time to develop a vision of what a more democratic communication system that operates outside of the existing market would look like.

Some current presidential candidates have unveiled plans to create publicly owned broadband Internet networks as an expansion of, and eventual replacement for, the existing system. These plans create public interest regulations on existing ISP’s, using antitrust legislation much as we currently regulate the companies that manage electricity, gas, and other critical infrastructure utilities in the United States. Most importantly, the plans would create publicly owned competitive alternatives to corporate ISPs.

It Now Seems as if Another Internet Connection Method is Actually Possible

Over the past 20 years across the country, hundreds of cities and towns have taken it upon themselves to build their own publicly owned broadband networks. In general, these networks are cheaper, faster, and operate with greater public accountability, despite lacking their enormous economies of scale. Despite having been fought against tooth and nail by the incumbent ISP’s. <https://muninetworks.org/>

Current proposed High-Speed Internet for All plans provide Federal support for local broadband initiatives, or Internet cooperatives. The plans propose billions in infrastructure grants to be distributed to municipalities and states that want to voluntarily build out publicly owned and democratically controlled, co-operative, open access broadband networks.

These plans do not build broadband infrastructure, but make the political terrain more tolerant of the expansion of public broadband initiatives. This is done by providing funding and technical assistance, and repealing laws in twenty-five states that prohibit or inhibit municipalities from building their own networks.

These public broadband networks would invest in low-income neighborhoods and would be required to abide by universal service requirements. These networks would be required to

deploy technologies that meet minimum speed thresholds, and would condition grants on and adherence to strong labor, wage, and sourcing standards.

The funding sources for all of this new democracy are unclear at this point, but hey, how about we get some of that \$400 billion back? Perhaps a tax or a rebate in exchange for no prison time for the fraud and extortion carried out against all of us?

Under these plans, the FCC would be de-neutered and be again able to regulate the rates that for-profit ISPs can charge their subscribers. ISPs would also be required to offer a low-cost Internet plan, which would be fully subsidized by the government for low-income households. Eligibility for subsidized internet access would be tied to eligibility for means-tested social programs like SNAP and Medicaid, effectively integrating Internet access into the welfare state. This would put more money back in the hands of low-income families, and help close America's cavernous digital divide. Internet for All would also provide a source of jobs to construct and maintain the network. Installing high-speed internet could also potentially attract greater capital investment.

We could have a "public option" for Internet service that brings competing services to everyone regardless of his or her city, state, or zip code. After all, the Internet was invented from a massive public investment. It should now be returned to its rightful owners.

Source info: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/12/broadband-internet-bernie-sanders>

So in the end, Rural Broadband service equals economic growth, by keeping Wisconsin's talented young people from leaving the rural areas of the state and not limiting their ability to thrive in a digital economy. As of 2017, US ranks 9th in the world in fixed broadband speed at 70.75 Mbps average, but this is less than half top-ranked Singapore's 154.38 Mbps. The US is also one of the most expensive nations: in 120th place (out of 195).with an average monthly cost of \$67.69. Locally, Wisconsin ranks 41st in the United States in its ranking for Internet access, 32nd for broadband access with an average speed of 37.4 Mbps and coverage of 85.3%.

"In July 2013, the state created the Broadband Expansion Grant program to help meet the demand for improved broadband and encourage its development in Wisconsin's unserved and underserved areas. Since then, the PSC has awarded approximately \$20.1 million to 138 grant projects over six years. In September 2019, the PSC opened the Broadband Expansion Grant applications for 2020. This grant cycle provides up to \$24 million for improving internet access across Wisconsin." <https://psc.wi.gov/Pages/Programs/WBO.aspx>

This appears to be just enough money to say you did something, but not really.

"With the development of the Internet we are in the middle of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire. I used to think that it was just the biggest thing since the Gutenberg printing press, but now I think you have to go back further." John Perry Barlow