

One bipartisan priority: Broadband Internet access infrastructure

At the dawn of the Obama administration, broadband infrastructure first became a national priority in the economic stimulus package passed by Congress. The FCC came up with an ambitious but practical National Broadband Plan, that clearly advanced the mission in concrete ways. But too many of its aspirational goals have not yet been met, and too many American homes and businesses still lack high quality affordable Internet access.

The simple proof of this is in the cities, towns and mid-sized companies that have grabbed control of their destiny by building their own fiber optic networks and links to factories and plants.

In October of 2015, the House Energy & Commerce Communications & Technology Subcommittee held a hearing on barriers to broadband deployment. Members of Congress usually at odds with each other along party lines over FCC regulation, found themselves in violent agreement on an “all of the above” approach to broadband.

They wanted to empower all possible technologies, all types of providers: private sector, municipal, and public/private partnerships, and encourage active support from all levels of government.

The bipartisan No Labels organization’s Policy Playbook, published last spring, notes that “America’s roads, bridges, public transportation systems and electric and broadband infrastructure are in increasingly poor condition.” It pegs our global ranking on Internet bandwidth at 35th. World travelers know firsthand how connectivity in certain Asian and Nordic countries puts us to shame.

Just a few weeks ago, Google hosted a conference entitled “Transforming Communities: Broadband Goals for 2017 and Beyond” organized by Next Century Cities, USIgnite and the Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition. The speakers included three members of the new Senate Broadband Caucus: [John Boozman](#) (R-Ark.), [Angus King](#) (I-Maine) and [Amy Klobuchar](#) (D-Minn.). Nuts and bolts panel discussions focused on how federal and state governments can help local communities to ensure their citizens and small businesses have access to the 21st Century connectivity they need to thrive. There were calls for more federal broadband funding, spectrum sharing and co-ordination of diverse infrastructure build outs. There were calls for elimination of legal and regulatory barriers and bureaucratic delays at the state and local levels.

A public interest expert in telecom policy, Susan Crawford, recently suggested that the president elect’s son-in-law Jared Kushner also “gets it” about not settling for less than great broadband in the U.S. Having worked on connectivity ratings for commercial buildings, Mr. Kushner knows that high quality broadband connections are a basic prerequisite for economic success.

It turns out that high capacity Internet connections are indeed essential for wifi access, education technology or “edtech”, mobile payments and other “fintech”, cloud computing, data analytics and data storage, social media and website management, advertising placement, health IT and genomics, machine learning, artificial intelligence (AI), HD video, augmented reality (AR), autonomous vehicles, and robotics. The industries of the near future and the jobs they create will demand access to smart, largely wired fiber optic infrastructure to function on a daily basis. Economic revitalization of small towns and rural areas in Virginia and across America will depend on the availability of digital infrastructure.

In Washington, bipartisan collaboration on a smart national infrastructure

bank, and policies that promote efficiencies in construction, could be accompanied by elimination of barriers to innovative local broadband network projects. The U.S. may already enjoy world class data transmission capabilities from coast to coast and to other continents, but if local access connections remain subpar in many places, American prosperity and global competitiveness will surely suffer. It would be great if the 115th Congress and the new administration worked together on creative pragmatic solutions to this basic domestic economic challenge.

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The views expressed by authors are their own and not the views of The Hill.