Wiring Rural Kent with High-Speed Broadband

BY LINDA PARKOWSKI

IN THE LAST TWO YEARS, the Kent Economic Partnership (KEP) has helped facilitate some big wins for Kent County; particularly in attracting new manufacturing to the area. A few standout examples are the joint venture between Shoreline Vinyl and Duratec at the former PPG paint plant in Cheswold, Avalon Industries Inc. and International Container Corp. moving into the Dover Post building, and most recently, the commitment from U.S. Corrugated of Delaware – large cardboard box manufacturer – to build a massive $80 million facility in Dover.



Attracting businesses creates an economic ripple effect in our communities by offering more opportunity to residents. We are proud to have been involved in these projects that will bring hundreds of high-quality jobs with them. However, during our analysis of the county's greatest needs, we keep coming back to a significant lapse in infrastructure: rural broadband connectivity.

The county has long been aware of the need to extend the reach of high-speed internet access to our rural areas. This need continues to grow. Especially in the times of COVID-19, you could say it has become urgent.

To this end, the KEP assembled a Kent County Rural Broadband Committee in June 2020 comprised of various legislators, providers, and stakeholders. So far, we've determined that the two biggest issues thwarting broadband expansion are accessibility and affordability.

From coordinating efforts and subsidizing them to addressing zoning regulation hurdles, all options are being considered. Broadband funding set aside in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act has been of particular interest. However, these funds need to be spent by December 31, 2020, and may be restricted to contracts that were already in place. Because of this, the committee set a goal to produce a full action plan before the end of 2020.

What we already have

As an unregulated industry, there is not much in the way of convenient mapping to show where and what type of internet connectivity is available in the county. The Delaware Department pf Technology & Information (DTI) is working to gauge this through various speed tests and surveys.

Anecdotally, it is known that the central corridor running through Kent County along Rt. 1 and Rt. 13 is well wired for broadband. If you go east or west of this artery, you find a high-speed internet infrastructure desert. The various cable and fiber currently in place appear to be piecemeal, many areas still have no access to broadband.

What is the benefit?

We already know high-speed broadband internet is crucial to employers. Often, the first question a business locating in Kent County will ask what internet providers are available. That said, the utility of broadband, especially in the rural areas of Kent County, is not limited to businesses.

Prior to COVID-19, a nationwide shift toward working from home was already beginning to take shape. The pandemic magnified this immensely. Many thousands of residents switched to remote working, and their children switched to remote learning. Getting connected and staying connected grew from a convenience to an economic necessity.

Although Kent County has greatly developed in the last few decades, it is still largely an agricultural community. It should come as no surprise that our farmers have a rapidly growing need for high-speed internet as well. With new types of precision farming equipment being rolled out onto cropland every year, having a secure, reliable broadband connection is essential.

Aggressively expanding affordable broadband access in Kent County's rural communities is imperative. The need for high-speed internet isn't going anywhere. An investment in this infrastructure will unlock opportunity, efficiency, and productivity for our citizens well into the future. ■



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