

Lawmakers are on the ball with statewide broadband task force

By Jim Hoolihan, president, Blandin Foundation

There are at least two sure signs of spring: baseball and action at the State Capitol. I would not have expected, though, that they would come together on an issue like broadband technology.

It was baseball legend Yogi Berra who said, “If you don’t know where you are going you may end up somewhere else.” And it is rural communities of Minnesota that have been saying that if we, as a state, don’t know where we’re going on broadband we may end up economically sidelined.

State legislators and Governor Pawlenty heard the voices of our communities and showed leadership in forming the state’s new public-private broadband task force. This task force will develop and define statewide policy, goals, timing, funding systems, partners and principles for deployment of ultra high-speed or “big broadband” technology throughout Minnesota.

The Blandin Foundation’s relationships with more than 5,000 rural community leaders who have participated in our training programs over 23 years give us a front-row seat to appreciate leadership in action. Leadership most certainly matters, and I commend those—across parties, across the state and across sectors—who are working to envision and make real a future that engages all of our communities, through technology, in rapidly evolving economies and systems.

We also have learned and led through our Blandin Foundation Broadband Initiative, which has been at work since 2003 to spur innovation and to ensure that deployment is available to even the most rural communities. Communities like Staples, Hutchinson, Morris and Moose Lake will tell you that, despite their innovative and hard work and the support of the Blandin Foundation, it will be a statewide partnership and intentional deployment platform that will bring to all Minnesota communities the shot at a globally competitive future. And neither the public nor the private sector can do it alone.

We are delighted to see the conversation about next-generation broadband kicked up to the statewide level, and we honor the very hard work that has been done in the trenches of rural communities over the past five years to help inform this broader state initiative. In fact, the diverse Minnesota leaders involved in the Blandin Broadband Initiative’s strategy board crafted a vision of Minnesota as a world leader and principles to help us get there. We commend these principles as a starting point for the state’s broadband task force:

- **Affordability:** Find innovative ways to make broadband affordable in order for all to experience Internet advantages
- **Collaboration:** Establish public-private partnership collaborations

- **Competitiveness:** Increased customer choice and innovation are positive outcomes; encourage competition among service providers
- **Interoperability:** Regardless of the technology used for ultra high-speed delivery, all systems must seamlessly interoperate with all other technologies.
- **Neutrality:** Ultra high-speed broadband policy should be promoted regardless of the technology platform that delivers it
- **Research:** Reward ongoing broadband innovation and continued research
- **Symmetry:** Provide symmetric speeds (same speeds upstream and downstream) and facilitate “source-to-source” communication
- **Ubiquity:** Support the concept that eventually ultra high-speed broadband should be available to every person, business and institution in our state
- **World Class:** Settle for nothing less than a world-class ultra high-speed broadband system.

One of the mantras of the Blandin Community Leadership Program is that community leadership is something you have to do yourself, but can't do alone. This never has been truer than when preparing ourselves and our state for a demanding technological future.

I'm sure Yogi would tell us to swing for the seats.

Submitted 4.30.08

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