



Minnesota can be a broadband leader

By: **Sheldon Johnson**, Bemidji Pioneer 6/7/2010

Take a moment and picture a high school student at his home or local library in rural Minnesota taking online courses from a technical college in the Twin Cities. Imagine a doctor in Rochester advising a patient in Grand Rapids via a video-conference about the best treatment options available for a serious illness or performing tele-surgery from thousands of miles away using robotics. Envision a farmer in southern Minnesota buying his cattle in an online livestock auction.

All these can and will be realized — as long as we have the appropriate broadband speeds and infrastructure.

While Minnesota and the United States were once leaders in broadband penetration and speed, we have fallen behind. The U.S. now ranks 15th in broadband speed and 12th in broadband penetration. Minnesota, once a top-tier broadband state, has fallen back into the middle of the pack.

The Minnesota Legislature recently took steps to change that. During the 2010 legislative session, the Legislature adopted statewide broadband goals. The goals were based on the recommendations of the Ultra-High Speed Broadband Task Force that convened in 2008 and spent 18 months researching broadband in Minnesota and how we compare to our neighboring states and the world.

The goals state that by 2015 all Minnesotans will have access to broadband Internet with download speeds of 10 megabits per second and upload speeds of five megabits per second; Minnesota will be in the top five states nationally in broadband access and speed; and that we will put together an advisory committee with a wide range of stakeholders to make sure we are reaching these goals in the most efficient and cost-effective manner possible.

The importance of broadband Internet access cannot be overstated. According to a report prepared for the U.S. Department of Commerce, "Communities in which mass-market broadband was available experienced more rapid growth in employment, the number of businesses overall, and businesses in IT-intensive sectors, relative to comparable communities without broadband." In addition, the report found that communities with broadband access had higher property values.

Oftentimes when we think about our state's infrastructure, we think only about roads, bridges, water lines, power lines and sewer systems. As the U.S. economy shifts and begins to deliver more services digitally — such as health care,

engineering, finance and entertainment — we need to make sure we have the infrastructure available for businesses to compete to deliver those services with global competitors.

We've already seen some progress. As part of President Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, \$7.2 billion will be spent nationally on broadband Internet infrastructure. Minnesota communities have been aggressive in their pursuit of this funding. Communities in northeast, southern and west-central Minnesota have already secured over \$60 million in federal funding to improve and expand broadband Internet access.

I'm pleased the Legislature and governor understand the vital role broadband will play in Minnesota's economic recovery. Our progress moving toward 2015 will be exciting.

Sheldon Johnson, DFL-St. Paul, is a member of the Minnesota House and chairman of the House Telecommunications Regulation and Infrastructure Division.