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Can you hear me now?

Some worry that 'e-state' will disconnect communities

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Editor's note: This story is part of a series on the findings of the Council on the Future of Vermont. For related articles, log onto the "Future of Vermont" special content section on www.rutlandherald.com.

They inspire poets and painters, campers and climbers, scientists and souls yearning to touch the sky.

Who doesn't love the Green Mountains?

Vermonters who view them as the state's biggest barrier to up-to-date telecommunications.

Unlike more plugged-in places, Vermont has less than 200,000 high-speed Internet lines and cell phone service to only about 60 percent of its population, leaving many of the state's 621,000 residents feeling disconnected from the rest of the world.

"Many Vermonters believe universal access to affordable broadband Internet and cellular telephone communications networks is essential to realize new opportunities in commerce, arts and community," the Council on the Future of Vermont writes in its recent report, "Imagining Vermont: Values and Vision for the Future."

Gov. James Douglas agrees. In his 2007 inaugural address, he called for Vermont to become "the nation's first true e-state" with universal cellular and broadband coverage by 2010.

But that's easier said than done. The state is full of hills and hollows that can restrict phone signals and require countless miles of computer wiring. Leaders are straining to find the hundreds of millions of dollars needed to fund improvements. Locals, in turn, are worried about the larger societal costs.

"Some Vermonters eloquently warned the council that too much participation in digital communities, games and networks could actually undermine the sense of community and way of life in Vermont," the nonprofit, nonpartisan study group reports.

So how does the state allow everyone to log onto Facebook while keeping relations face to face?

'Important as the Interstate'

The council's report - available on the Web site www.futureofvermont.org - notes that Vermonters take pride in a strong sense of community.

"The high value that Vermonters place on neighborliness and on the importance of every individual has contributed to the traditionally high-level commitment of the state to social programs," the council says, "and the consistent and compassionate efforts across the state of volunteers and professionals working with dedication to make life better for all."

But many in small towns also want to plug into the big world. Surveying almost 4,000 Vermonters at more than 100 meetings over 18 months, the council heard people of all ages and occupations - from students to farmers to factory owners - note that modern telecommunications are "now an essential foundation for business development, community connection, and - for young people especially - social networking."

The Center for Social Science Research at St. Michael's College in Colchester, writing in the council-commissioned study "Vermont in Transition," agrees: "A well-developed electronic communications infrastructure, which includes a statewide network of cell phone and broadband technology, is as important to the future of Vermont as was the development of the interstate highway system."

Economic experts say Vermont must tap digital content and customers to compensate for its relatively small, scattered population.

"Rural places need access to larger markets via the Internet even more than their more populated neighbors," the council says. "With access to affordable high-speed connections, rural businesses can use digital information and technology systems to compete with service-based businesses from all over the world."

Others told the study group about technology's potential to help people work from home, to enhance civic communication through local Web sites and to make schools, hospitals, libraries, government and emergency services more efficient.

"Reducing the costs of medical visits through telemedicine, enabling students to take online classes from home, staying connected with distant loved ones - these and other benefits come with investment in a comprehensive and reliable cellular and broadband infrastructure," the council says.

Challenging landscape

But the state faces many hurdles in filling the gaps.

Take geography. Cell phone companies, hampered by too many mountains and too few signal towers, can only provide coverage to about half of Vermont's acreage. As a result, 57 percent of adult Vermonters have mobile telecommunications devices - far

less than the national rate of 85 percent.

Internet availability is higher: Almost 90 percent of Vermonters can purchase at least one mass-market broadband service through a phone or cable company, although providers have yet to wire many tiny, remote towns that offer little or no return on such investment. As a result, Chittenden County has the highest rate of access; the state's Northeast Kingdom has the lowest.

But just because Vermonters can sign up for the Internet doesn't mean they all do. Many told the council they can't afford it or feel intimidated because they're older or less educated.

Still others worry about the societal costs.

"Vermonters do not want to see Internet culture undermine or weaken the face-to-face interactions," the council reports.

Although technology allows more people to work from home, it also "keeps them isolated instead of interacting."

"Some Vermonters," the council reports, "spoke with concern about what they see as a growing cultural gap between those people who work from home or commute to work regularly and have little to do with their communities and those who still connect locally, seeing and interacting with their neighbors."

People surfing the Internet aren't hiking, biking or skiing, others said. Several referred to Richard Louv's book "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder," which warns that today's youth aren't playing outside like their parents and grandparents did growing up. That has some adults worried that future generations won't learn the importance of preserving the state's environment.

"Young people," one Randolph resident told the council, "don't see the value of actual physical community rather than virtual community."

One Burlington young woman voiced concern that her peers increasingly were relating with computer screens, cell phones and other technology rather than with each other.

"The pendulum needs to swing back the other way," she said. "We need to use technology as a means and not an end."

'No silver bullet here'

Tom Evslin, head of the state's Office of Economic Stimulus and Recovery, heard many views about technology when the council gathered 500 local leaders last spring for a Summit on the Future of Vermont.

"We need it socially, I know we need it economically, we're at a disadvantage in education, our ambitious plans for electronic health records don't work without it,

employers tell us they need it ..."

Evslin's office is helping several businesses and nonprofit organizations apply for more than \$130 million in federal stimulus money to boost the state's Internet access. In the first of several decisions expected this year, the government last week gave Vermont \$1.2 million for continued broadband planning.

The separate Vermont Telecommunications Authority, established by the Legislature to advance the state's 2010 coverage goal, also is working on several projects. It's helping the Vermont Electric Power Co. install fiber-optic cable on its high-voltage transmission lines and proposing small windmills statewide that would provide not only electricity but also cell phone and wireless Internet signals.

"There is no silver bullet here," says Christopher Dutton, chairman of the authority. "Because of Vermont's topography and rural population, we're going to need a variety of approaches to get things done."

Summit participants voiced support for such efforts but echoed concerns about the effects on community. That's why the council is calling for balance.

"The success of Vermont depends on the preservation of the vital sense of community," it says. "It may not answer all the state's problems, but it could be a pre-condition to solving them."

So is effective communication.

"Town Meeting Day should continue into the future, but embrace new technologies to further local community participation and dialogue, including Web casts, Web-based interaction or online and cell-phone voting," the council continues. "It is time to bring town meeting into the 21st century."

The head of the telecommunications authority was on his cell phone when asked if the state could hit its 2010 target.

"It's doable to achieve headway," Dutton said.

That's when his phone momentarily lost its signal.

His comeback: "We need better cell service."

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