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Anderson campaign: Rural Wisconsin's broadband solution is just an FCC decision away

Posted on Thursday, Oct 26, 2017

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On Friday October 20th, the president of Microsoft, Brad Smith, spoke at Fox Valley Technical College in his hometown of Appleton. His talk focused on "digital inclusion." Wisconsin is ground zero when it comes to the challenges of digital inclusion. The internet revolution has failed to reach much of rural Wisconsin, leaving hundreds of thousands of state residents without important economic, educational and networking opportunities.

In an era when it's all but impossible to thrive in global commerce without the internet, 768,000—or more than 13 percent—of Wisconsinites do not have access to wired broadband 25mbps or faster. Over 200,000 reside in areas without any wired internet providers at all. Thankfully, Smith is among the innovative leaders committed to addressing this issue.

Earlier this year, Smith announced that Microsoft would pursue a new, non-profit Rural Airband Initiative to expand broadband to rural America. The concept would essentially leverage blank TV channels—"white spaces"—to transmit internet signals to rural communities. These signals would function like a powerful wi-fi signal that could blanket even the most remote areas. To facilitate the plan, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) would simply need to reserve three

unused channels in every market language for private companies to provide broadband access.

Even though the federal government has invested over $4.5 million in grants to expand broadband in Wisconsin and a broad, bipartisan coalition in Congress has endorsed the white spaces proposal, the effort remains stalled by regulatory bureaucracy.

FCC regulations designate certain frequencies for non-commercial use, which make it impossible for Microsoft and others to get the empty TV channels they need for the revolutionary wireless internet project. The rule—originally enacted to prevent signal interference with licensed users—has become outdated amid technological advancements. But the regulation still serves the interests of a powerful broadcast special interest that has acquired a monopoly over the white spaces and is now waging an all-out campaign to preserve their privilege.

While corporations and D.C. politicians certainly aren’t blameless in the woes of rural Wisconsin, the Rural Airband Initiative is a case study in how innovative policy, championed by a broad cross-section of political interests, can be stymied by misguided regulations and entrenched, crony lobbies.

The onus is on President Trump’s FCC to deregulate the broadband industry and open the door to competition from Microsoft and other innovators committed to expanding opportunity to rural America. If he does, free market, limited government, libertarian ideas like using white spaces to bridge America’s digital divide will ultimately benefit everyone.

Despite a number of costly federal and state projects to bring internet access to remote areas, government has failed to meet the internet needs of rural Wisconsin residents. Fortunately, corporations like Microsoft, have a way to bring the internet to every person in Wisconsin. Now it’s up to bureaucrats at the FCC to get out of the way and allow it to happen.