

Opening Remarks

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Realizing Our Broadband Future: Getting from Here to There

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Welcome everyone! I'm Bernadine Joselyn, Director of Public Policy and Engagement at the Blandin Foundation. On behalf of the Foundation, it's my pleasure to welcome you to Duluth and to Blandin Foundation's 6th annual broadband conference, *Realizing our Broadband Future: Getting from Here There*.

The theme we've chosen for this year's gathering is about getting from here to the future – but not just any future – a future of our choosing. As long ago as 513 BC the Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously said that nothing is permanent except change.

But if change is inevitable; intentional change is optional.

The Future does feel like it's getting closer. The world is speeding up. But is it the future we would choose? In one of our preconference webinar sessions, presenter Delore Zimmerman quoted author William Gibson – the man who coined the word “cyberspace” -- as saying: “the future is already here – it's just not widely distributed yet.”

Those of you who were able to join DEED's Drew Digby for yesterday's walking tour of downtown Duluth's redevelopment caught a glimpse of one version of what intentional change looks like: you saw a city that is investing in the infrastructure and culture necessary to attract and retain the creative class – which Richard Florida has identified as the engine of economic growth.

But as Gibson said, that chosen future is not yet widely distributed. Many policymakers and community leaders still have not embraced the notion that broadband is no longer a “nice to have” – but a “gotta have.” Although evidence abounds that Broadband is the critical infrastructure of the 21st century's digital, information, networked economy, our national and state policies have yet to catch up.

The Internet has now been with us long enough to allow researchers to gather empirical data confirming what many broadband champions have been saying for a long time: more and better broadband leads to a more competitive economy and improved quality of life.

For example, a number of Department of Commerce's Economic Research Service studies conclusively show that rural communities with greater broadband access to the Internet enjoy greater economic growth.

Wage and salary jobs, as well as the number of businesses and entrepreneurs, grow faster in counties with robust broadband internet access. Broadband enhances the provision of important services like health and education, improves the ability of government to offer to-your-home services at reduced

costs, and expands household income prospects through such activities as telework.

And broadband access has direct implications for the well-being of communities beyond just economics. Contrary to worries expressed in the Internet's infancy that it would weaken community ties as people went online and found their own virtual communities of shared interest, we now know that broadband use actually fosters community involvement.

A 2008 study by Stern *et.al.* showed that the use of the Internet is positively associated with higher degrees of community participation across a variety of groups and organizations. Stern's data suggest that rural communities that rely most on volunteerism are in turn most vulnerable to being disadvantaged as a consequence of either a lack of internet access or inability to adopt broadband technologies.

At the same time as the case for broadband as an engine for economic prosperity, community building and quality of life is becoming more compelling, America's performance is slipping. This example of how the future is unevenly distributed should be deeply troubling to all of us.

In 2001, the US was ranked fifth in the world in the number of broadband connections *per capita*, according to the International Telecommunications Union. Today, depending on whose data you use, the US ranks anywhere from 12th to 22nd. Americans also pay more for slower connection speeds than countries like Sweden, France and Japan, which have national policies that prioritize investment in broadband access.

And there's more bad news. As America slips farther and farther behind our competitors in the industrialized world, so are poor, rural and minority Americans becoming increasingly isolated from the digital mainstream. According to a study released in August by the Communications Workers of America, 46% of rural households do not subscribe to broadband, and usage varies based on income. Urbanites are nearly twice as likely to have a broadband connection as rural residents. Only one in 10 households with incomes below \$30,000 has broadband access, compared to 60 percent of household with incomes above \$100,000.

America's deteriorating rankings in broadband penetration and the increasing disparities we're experiencing in access and use recently were put in even starker context when Finland became the first country in the world to declare broadband Internet access a legal right. In June, France's highest court declared such access a human right, and the United Nations also is making a big push in that direction, but so far Finland has gone the furthest by legally mandating speed.

Finland's move is aimed at bringing Internet access to all rural areas. Like in the US, rural Finland is underserved compared to urban Finland. Beginning in July of next year, telecommunication companies in Finland will be required to provide all 5.2 million citizens with Internet connections of at least 1 megabit per second, with the goal of achieving speeds 100 times faster – 100 megabit per second – for all by 2015.

Commenting on the announcement, the legislative counselor for Finland's Ministry of Transport and Communications said: "We think (internet access) is something you cannot live without in modern society. Like banking services or water or electricity, you need Internet connection."

Now compare that mandate to the Minnesota's Ultra High Speed Task Force recommendation that the state adopt a goal of 10-20 megabit download speeds available to all Minnesotans by 2015. To my mind – this target goal is another troubling example of an unevenly distributed future.

I will conclude my reflections by returning to the place I began - talking about our conference theme of getting from here to there and about the challenge of ensuring that the future is more evenly distributed, including to rural Minnesota.

So far we're still seeing uneven distribution in the acceptance of broadband as critical infrastructure for the future; uneven distribution in the quality and cost of broadband access for rural and urban, rich and poor, well and undereducated citizens, Americans and our competitors, and uneven distribution in thinking about Internet access in terms of legal, and even human, rights.

To misquote something my father often said, in terms of Internet access it is better to be young, urban and rich, than poor, old and rural. And it's better to be Finnish --- or Japanese, or French, or Australian, or Swedish -- than Minnesotan.

One development that does make me hopeful about our ability to get from here to a future we would choose for our children and our communities is the recent increase in the level of engagement and organizing now in play to bring a vibrant, evenly distributed future to all corners of Minnesota.

Over the past year, many citizens took the opportunity to testify before the Governor's Ultra High Speed Broadband Task Force about the importance of high speed broadband access to their families, businesses and communities. The Minnesota Broadband Coalition – an informal group of broadband advocates and champions – was formed. And just last month, The Media Grassroots Network, an emerging coalition of regional organizations working together to build a movement for media justice and communications rights, announced the launch of a Minnesota Digital Justice Coalition. Similar coalitions are being built across the country.

We're excited to have representatives from Minnesota's new Digital Justice Coalition with us today, and welcome their voices in today's discussions.

We're excited to have each one of you here with us today, as we set out to tackle, together, the challenge of getting from here to a broadband future of our choosing.