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Ohio to map areas lacking high-speed Internet Strickland asks board to transfer money for unbudgeted endeavor

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COLUMBUS - Ohio's cable and telephone industries won't talk to one another, so Ohio is about to spend millions to identify areas of the state that don't have access to high-speed Internet.

"What we hope to do is bridge the digital divide in a way that will be good for all Ohio communities and all Ohioans," Gov. Ted Strickland said yesterday. "Bridging this divide is a key component to our state's Turnaround Ohio effort and our state's broadband strategy."

The state will spend \$2.9 million in the current two-year budget biennium to form a non-profit organization, Connect Ohio, that will work to create a map showing gaps between broadband networks across the state.

Another \$3.9 million is anticipated to be spent on the effort in the 2010-2011 biennium. Charles Moses, president of the Ohio Telecom Association, said the private sector will dedicate "significant financial resources" - potentially a 20 percent match to government funding - to staff and operate the non-profit coordinating agency.

"We know the model works," he said.

The proposal also was endorsed by the Ohio Cable Telecommunications Association, whose members include Buckeye CableSystem. Buckeye is owned by Block Communications Inc., which also owns The Blade.

The announcement came several months after the governor created the Ohio Broadband Council to explore ways of expanding high-speed Internet service to all corners of the state. At the time, there was discussion of allowing underserved areas to piggyback onto university, school, and government systems already in place.

Mr. Strickland said it came as a surprise to him that the industries didn't already know who does and does not have access to high-speed Internet.

"They know who they're serving, but they don't know who their competitors may be serving," he said. "There probably has been an understandable reluctance to share certain information."

Connect Ohio would be created as a subsidiary of Connected Nation, a national nonprofit that grew out of a similar effort in Kentucky. The organization boasts that broadband penetration in Ohio's southern neighbor increased from 60 percent to 96 percent in three years.

The nonprofit's focus initially will be on administrative and mapping functions, but the governor did not rule out having the state become more involved later if necessary.

The expenditure had not been anticipated in the current two-year budget, prompting Mr. Strickland yesterday to successfully ask the legislative Ohio Controlling Board to transfer it from other purposes. This occurs at a time when the governor is making budget cuts in social services and elsewhere to balance a shaky state budget.

"There is a legitimate interest in trying to expand broadband coverage," said Zach Schiller, senior researcher for Policy Matters Ohio, an organization that has been critical in the past of so-called "corporate welfare."

"On the face of it, I don't think the state should say that's not our business," he said. "The private sector has failed to do it entirely on its own, so there may be a useful state role in seeing that depressed areas attain broadband."

"The question is, is this the way the state ought to be spending its money?" he said, arguing that the real culprit is ongoing tax-cutting that has made such choices more difficult.

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