

The Columbus Dispatch

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Strickland's goal: broadband for all

Initiative aimed at expanding Internet access throughout state

Tuesday, December 18, 2007 2:57 AM

BY **MARK NIQUETTE**
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Gov. Ted Strickland announced a new initiative yesterday with the goal of making high-speed Internet access available to all Ohioans, no matter where they live in the state.

"What we hope to do is to bridge the digital divide in a way that will be good for all Ohio communities and all Ohioans," Strickland said at a news conference announcing Connect Ohio.

Billed as a public-private partnership between Internet providers and the state, Connect Ohio will pinpoint where there is no broadband access and establish committees in every county to study their access needs, Strickland said.

The idea is to show what demand exists, thereby encouraging providers to expand high-speed Internet service and open new job and educational opportunities for those who don't have access today.

The Controlling Board approved the initial \$2.9 million for the project yesterday through fiscal year 2009, and Strickland proposes spending an additional \$3.9 million in fiscal year 2010-11.

The money will be used to create and staff a new nonprofit corporation called Connect Ohio Initiatives LLC. It would be a subsidiary of Connected Nation, a Kentucky-based group that has worked on such projects nationwide.

Officials couldn't say yesterday what percentage of Ohio may not have broadband access, and providers have been reluctant to share information about their service areas for competitive reasons, Strickland said.

The first task of the initiative will be to map where those gaps in the state are, said Brian Mefford, president and chief executive of Connected Nation.

Connect Ohio will hire staff members, including regional program managers, to set up "e-community leadership teams" in all 88 counties consisting of leaders in government, business, health care, education and other areas to develop customized plans for broadband service in each county, he said.

Strickland said he hopes the federal government will provide additional funding, and Internet providers also are expected to help pay for the initiative and other things such as computers for areas that need them.

The Ohio Cable Telecommunications Association and Ohio Telecom Association both commended the proposal, with the Telecom Association committing "substantial financial support" to Connect

Ohio. An amount was not disclosed.

mniquette@dispatch.com

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