



Article: What about broadband in Crawford?

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GALION -- A high-tech future demands high speed Internet. A large group of community leaders from Crawford County dreamed and discussed Wednesday afternoon what better broadband service could mean to the people they help, the people they hire, the people they serve and those they educate.

"One of the biggest problems," North Central State's Don Plotts said, "is getting people to understand they need technology."

The session at Galion Community Hospital, part of Gov. Ted Strickland's Connect Ohio initiative "to accelerate technology and close the digital divide," was led by Sage Cutler and Gary Lambert of Connect Ohio. People from all facets of Crawford County were invited to discuss how their companies and organizations use broadband now and how it could impact them in the future.

"This is the second benchmark work session in the state," Cutler said. Gallia County was the first and all 88 counties in the state will begin the process within the next two years. Cutler said Crawford County was selected to be among the first "because there were some other broadband initiatives (here)."

Those in attendance included government officials from across the county, representatives of business and industry, education, health care and community organizations.

Part of the process was to divide them into nine "sectors" as defined by their profession or the organization they represented. Wednesday's meeting had participants in seven of the nine sectors.

Each sector discussed where it was at locally regarding broadband use, its application and implication, and what could be improved in the near future with better broadband resources. Cutler explained that Connect Ohio is a public and private partnership.

"It's not costing the counties a thing," Cutler said. "That's going to be the cost the providers themselves invest."

The concept is that by detailing the needs and potential for effective broadband usage in each county, Internet providers will have a better idea of

where and how to invest in improving service.

"It's driven by supply and demand like every other commodity," Cutler said.

The importance of quality broadband use is obvious to a business like Lifetouch Church Directories of Galion which deals in publications using digital photography.

"It's a huge value. The affordable availability to of broadband is critical to our company's future," Steve McElhatten said. "We have communications that come in large data files. These use are just huge files."

The faster those files can be transmitted, the faster they can be processed.

To the general public, better Internet service with broadband can lower transportation costs because more people will be able to work from home. It can also mean more affordable opportunities in education because of the availability of improved and more comprehensive online classes.

At first glance, availability and affordability don't appear to be a problem in Crawford County.

Connect Ohio's research shows the county has higher than average availability compared to the rest of the state. The average cost in Ohio for broadband service to households is just over \$35 per month. In Crawford County the price ranges from \$29.92 to \$32.52.

Many of those in attendance agreed with Plott about convincing people of the value and necessity of broadband Internet service.

"Our biggest issues aren't necessarily access, it's awareness and adoption," said Crawford County extension agent and professor, Steve Prohaska, who sat in on the agriculture sector. Citing the value of real-time information, Prohaska used the example of the effect of Japanese beetles on a farmer's crop of corn.

"People can make or save money immediately with the click of a button," Prohaska said, noting agriculture was still the county's biggest industry.

Wynford superintendent Steve Mohr said Internet access in students' homes to communicate with parents about their children and students' ability to do research outside the classroom is a pressing issue.

"One of the problems we have is a lack of Internet service, particularly for low income, rural families," Mohr said.

Part of the Connect Ohio initiative is a portion called No Child Left Unconnected that has a goal of placing computers in the homes of disadvantaged families.

Gary Miller, Crawford County commissioner, said providing information and services for constituents and sharing information between government entities would be valuable.

"Dollars, time and people would be high on our priority list," Miller said.

Another local issue regarding broadband service is band width. The wider the band, the greater volume and complexity of information it can carry. While some homes and businesses may currently have a form of broadband, cost and availability may prohibit them from receiving the type of service that is most beneficial to their needs.

"That's the problem here in Crawford County, we're at the end of the line," said Mike Morton, head of the local chapter of the American Red Cross. "We're like a third world country when it comes to being connected. Afghanistan is connected, Crawford County is not."

The group's next meeting is 3 p.m. Sept. 17 at Lowe-Volk Park.

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