

While Gary and Kevin spoke about how to move the broadband infrastructure ball forward, Scott and I were asked to share some comments from the field that help illustrate Why This is Important to all parts of Minnesota.

As most of you know, the Arrowhead region was blessed with three separate ARRA awards that will help build significant broadband infrastructure over the next three years. Soon, we hope Cook County will be served by a world-class fiber optic network that is currently under development by our own Arrowhead Electric Co-operative. We are cautiously excited to be this close to realizing the first critical step towards preparing our community for a sound economic future.

The county has been involved at different levels in meeting the community's telecommunication needs since the early 90s when it used the revolving loan fund to support the creation of a local internet cooperative when local businesses identified the need and no commercial provider would serve the area.

Three years ago it was identified again that there were significant gaps in what the existing providers could do vs what the community and its businesses said they needed. With the help of the Blandin Foundation, the county convened a working group to define those gaps, assess options for closing them, and explore what the ramifications would be for doing so.

After several months, our work confirmed what is now considered common knowledge: just like most rural areas, our community was under-served, the solutions were costly and beyond the means of any one entity, whether it be public or private --- existing provider or new entrant; and the potential for strengthening our community's economic, health, and educational futures was no longer a debatable issue.

The timing of this research project coincided with the announcement of the ARRA Broadband Stimulus finding. After a long and angst-filled process, we were ultimately successful in securing an award from the Rural Utilities Service through Arrowhead Electric Cooperative. At this point the county's role moved from being a lead actor as the convener and catalyst, to one of the supporting roles as Arrowhead now takes the lead as they work through the process of actually building the network.

While they are busy with the details of getting the cables strung and connecting homes and businesses, the county is working on its new role. Again, working with Blandin and the Minnesota Intelligent Rural Communities program, we are busy working on the soft skills necessary to realize and sustain the benefits from the network once it is installed. We are educating our citizens and businesses on how to use the new technologies, we are creating more public access points, we are building pilot projects that will demonstrate to the community how the new tools can be applied, and how they will be meaningful in our lives. We are also developing long-term educational tracks that will prepare our residents to fill the job opportunities that will come from this network, such as installing and supporting the new technologies.

We expect this phase of our involvement will take us at least 2 or 3 years of concentrated effort. From there we will slide into the analysis phase. We will assess progress on our goals towards a healthy economy, a more stable education system, and a sustainable health care eco-system. We will monitor how networks around the country and world are being applied to solve problems. We will use this wisdom to work on closing our own application gaps.

While it goes without saying any more that robust broadband infrastructure is necessary for a modern healthy economy; a thriving education system, and an affordable health care system; when it comes right down to it, the view from my seat is that the biggest risk we take by not solving this problem is that next generation won't want to live in a place where there is not good connectivity.

We need our next generation. Minnesota communities are asking the state to help us keep them.

Blandin asked us to give you our best thinking about the state's leadership role and the road ahead for state-wide broadband deployment.

My hope is that you will:

- Stay engaged.
- Continue your efforts to stay informed about the impacts of this issue on all parts of the state, particularly rural areas. Pay attention to how your kids and grandkids move through the world and expect these tools to be available to them. Understand that this is not a “frosting on the cake issue.”
- Listen to communities working on these issues and watch for the gaps.
- Bring your tools to the table and help us close those gaps.

High-speed communications is the critical next generation infrastructure for all Minnesota communities.