

OUR TOWNS Cedar County

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Broadband Ruling Could Hurt Towns Like Hartington

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HARTINGTON, Neb. — The way funds may be distributed as currently outlined by the National Broadband Plan has some rural service providers worried.

Drawn up by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the plan could have a "devastating" effect on rural America, said Mike Becker, regulatory manager and marketing manager for Hartelco, of Hartington, Neb.

"If it's passed like this, I would say most of your phone companies are going to shut their doors in the next 20 years, if not 10 years. Or they'll sell out and become absorbed by a bigger company," he said.

As written now, the plan would alter how service providers receive moneys from the Universal Service Fund (USF) and through access fees. USF was established in 1934 as a way to distribute funds to rural areas so phone service could be provided. Since that time, many of these companies use those funds to help provide broadband services. Under the guidelines of the plan,

funding would be received based only on the number of broadband customers.

"Let's say in Hartington, we've got 1,300 telephone customers," Becker said. "Out of those, how many broadband customers do we have? It's approximately 600-800. So, if we're going to get paid based on 800 versus 1,300, we're not going to have nearly the amount of funds available, and we won't be able to reinvest to upgrade our speed from 10 MG. It would be the same way in a smaller company, too. ...

"It just doesn't make sense," he said. "There's got to be a way to provide USF both for the landlines continuing and for wireless carriers, too."

The FCC's plan also eliminates access fees. Currently, phone lines are owned by service providers, so every time a call is made through a long-distance provider, they rent that phone line for the duration of the call.

"We get what we call access revenue from that because that's the time the company took to access that phone line," Becker said. "The FCC and its broadband plan does away with access."

According to Becker, approximately 70 percent of the revenue

generated by service providers come through the USF and access fees.

"You can imagine what would happen if those two parts of the revenue equation go away," he said. But funding isn't the only issue — broadband speed is also affected.

Under the FCC's plan, a speed of 4 MG will be provided to rural areas, and a speed of 100 MG for urban areas.

Becker said he has heard from several associates that the FCC does consider places like Omaha and Sioux Falls to be rural.

"To illustrate, we have up to 10 MG download speeds available right now," he said. "If we didn't have that, (the plan) would only support funds for us to do up to 4 MG download speeds."

Some in the industry estimate that 10 MG speeds won't be enough a few years down the road, Becker added.

"We're just going to get left in the dust," he said.

This point was touched on last month by Mark Bahnsen, general manager of Michigan's Bloomingdale Communications, when he testified at a House Agriculture Subcommittee on Rural Development, Biotechnology,

Specialty Crops and Foreign Agriculture hearing to review rural development programs in advance of the 2012 Farm Bill.

"Without comparable broadband speeds, rural communities, which are becoming increasingly dependent on broadband, will fall further behind and will be unable to compete and receive comparable job, health care or educational opportunities and services as urban Americans," Bahnsen told the subcommittee.

Becker said many service providers are now banding together to ensure that the FCC hears their concerns.

"There are at least five or six national organizations of which phone companies and cable companies are members," he said.

"Typically, they'll file their own separate comments with the FCC. They've all come together because they realize that this is a critical situation for all the rural areas of the country."

Those groups are also meeting with their senators and congressmen to see if they can't get the plan changed.

"All we're asking for is a level playing field," Becker said. For more information on the

National Broadband Plan, visit www.broadband.gov. Further information is available at the National

Telecommunications Cooperative Association's Web site: www.ntca.org.

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