

# Integral infrastructure

Broadband project will help  
drive economic development

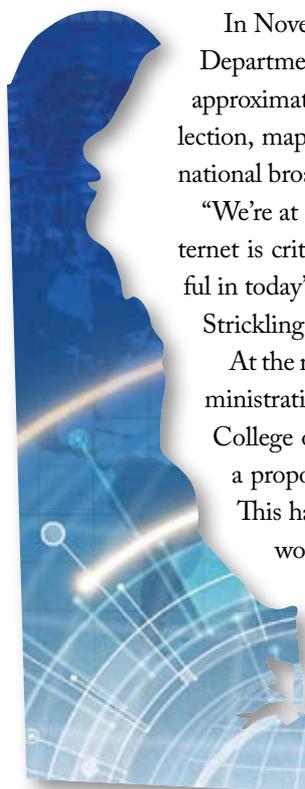
BY MARK DESHON

IN A FEB. 18 ARTICLE TITLED “FIX THE Bridges But Don’t Forget Broadband,” Wall Street Journal business writer Samuel Palmisano warned, “Without pervasive broadband, our country will not be prepared for a new world that is increasingly built on the fusion of the physical and the digital. Yet today the United States, the country that developed the Internet, ranks 12th in broadband penetration and 15th in average broadband speed.”

Regional economic prosperity—including that of Southern Delaware—depends in large part upon the provision of infrastructure. Roads, sewers, and drinking water systems have long been critical pieces in the economic-development puzzle.

Today, broadband infrastructure is emerging as a necessity for regions seeking to compete in a knowledge-based economy. It affords high-speed connections to the Internet and provides businesses, governments, and households with access to a host of time-saving, educational and commercially valuable applications made possible by the rapid transfer of data.

The National Telecommunications and Infrastructure Administration (NTIA), which is part of the U.S. Department of Commerce, and the Rural Utilities Service, which is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, are in the middle of putting \$7.2 billion in stimulus funding to work building broadband networks in parts of the country that lack high-speed Internet access.



In November, 2009, NTIA awarded the Delaware Department of Technology and Information (DTI) approximately \$1.5 million for broadband data-collection, mapping, and planning activities, as part of a national broadband data initiative.

“We’re at a point where high-speed access to the Internet is critical to the ability of people to be successful in today’s economy and society at large,” said Larry Strickling, head of NTIA.

At the request of DTI, the Institute for Public Administration (IPA) of the University of Delaware’s College of Education and Public Policy submitted a proposal to assist the state with these activities.

This has resulted in a \$371,419 award to IPA for work on two main project components over a five-year timeframe—broadband mapping and broadband planning.

Douglas Tuttle, IPA policy scientist, is the principal investigator and leads a project team of eight IPA staff and two doctoral students. IPA will be working closely with DTI’s project manager Baljinder Kamboj.

“This is an exciting project,” said Tuttle. “In terms of economic importance, the development of a national broadband-access system today has been likened to the creation of the interstate highway network during the mid-20th century. It is clearly evident how little of our state is directly served by the interstate highway system, and the same sort of regionalization of access need not exist with respect to broadband infrastructure.”

In July, 2009, nearly 50 participants in the workshop “Broadband Opportunities for Sussex County” identified potential opportunities for public-private partnerships and regional coordination to advance the expansion

sion of broadband infrastructure and service offerings in Sussex County and Delaware.

The workshop was held at the Elbert N. and Ann V. Carvel Research and Education Center on the University’s Georgetown campus. Participants included business, government, and higher-education officials from Sussex County and the region.

Workshop organizer Troy Mix, former IPA assistant policy scientist and now a doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois, opened the workshop by saying, “Rural areas such as Sussex County face major impediments to broadband deployment, but there are significant opportunities for businesses, households, and governments to benefit from broadband applications.”

Bryant Baker, a DTI program manager, discussed broadband-funding programs authorized by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and identified the development of a state broadband plan and map as a priority for Delaware.

The workshop discussion identified major rural-broadband policy issues including supply, demand, and measurement. Broadband infrastructure has typically been deployed more slowly in rural areas than it has in suburban and urban regions. Figures from the 2009 Pew Internet and American Life Project report that 46 percent of rural households use a broadband Internet connection, compared to 67 percent of non-rural households, and no national broadband map yet exists to comprehensively assess the extent and location of gaps in coverage.

Patrick Mitchell, president and CEO of the Maryland Broadband Cooperative, recounted the development and ongoing activities of his organization, which has been successful in leveraging federal, state, and private funds to construct an open-access, fiber-optic network across areas of eastern, southern, and western Maryland.

Delaware’s chief information officer, Secretary James Sills, III, and Robert O’Brien, executive vice president of Sequentus International, participated, with Mitchell in discussing options for enhancing broadband offerings in Delaware.

“Today’s workshop was an excellent first step in exploring the issues and opportunities related to expanding broadband access and availability. Future conversations will be critical to ensure that investments in broadband make the most positive impact on Delaware’s economic vitality and quality of life,” said Sills in addressing a potential path forward for broadband policy discussions.

Jennifer Antonelli of Mediacom Communications

and Thomas Worley of Comcast said that their respective firms serve broadband to significant portions of the county, but they acknowledged that gaps in infrastructure deployment and service adoption persist, due to factors such as low population densities and limited knowledge of potential uses for high-speed connections.

“Regions offering widespread access to fast Internet connections have a competitive edge.” — *Julie Wheatley*

The workshop was funded through the University’s Coastal Community Enhancement Initiative—a collaborative partnership among the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, the College of Earth, Ocean, and Environment, and the College of Education and Public Policy that focuses on growth, land use, and environmental impacts in Southern Delaware.

“Businesses require the utmost connectivity. When it comes to attracting and retaining employers, regions offering widespread access to fast Internet connections have a competitive edge over those with lagging connection speeds and spotty broadband coverage,” said Julie Wheatley, director of Sussex County Economic Development, stressing the importance of broadband for economic prosperity.

However, the lack of broadband availability is only part of the challenge in Delaware, because even in places where broadband is available, not everyone subscribes.

According to the Commerce Department’s national figures, among households that do not have broadband, 38 percent said they don’t need it or are not interested. Twenty-six percent said it is too expensive. Only 3.6 percent said they do not subscribe because it is not available where they live.

“Much like a high-speed roadway, access to broadband can be impeded by barriers that are income-based as well as geographic,” said Tuttle. “That’s why our project starts with an inventory of the characteristics of broadband services currently available to key community-service institutions, and follows up with a variety of opportunities for public engagement in the discussion of broadband policy.”

“For policymakers,” Strickling said, “this means that helping people see ‘what they are missing’ is another important piece of the puzzle.”

“This is where IPA comes in,” said Tuttle. 