

San Jose Mercury News Editorial: We're stuck in the slow lane of the information highway

Silicon Valley and U.S. must push harder for a faster Internet

**Mercury News Editorial
San Jose Mercury News**

Article Launched:05/07/2007 01:32:59 AM PDT

When it comes to reasonably priced, high-speed Internet service, the United States is an embarrassment. Despite years of promises from politicians and technology titans, the U.S. continues to lag far behind our global competitors.

During the past year, the U.S. slipped from 12th to 15th place in broadband Internet penetration per capita, behind much of Western Europe, Korea, Japan and Canada, according to a new report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Worse, much of U.S. "broadband" service is only a smidgen faster than a dial-up modem. Japan leads the world in cutting-edge fiber connections, offering speeds of up to 100 Mbps to 7.9 million home subscribers in 2006. In the United States, only a paltry 700,000 have fiber connections. Moreover, the Japanese pay \$35 a month for their ultrafast speed, which is enough to stream full-screen, high-definition video. Most Americans pay the same price for one-twentieth the speed.

Both government and the telecommunications industry are to blame. The technology to deliver truly high-speed Internet access is there, especially for cable subscribers. Customers need to demand better service from providers.

The government needs to step in, too. As we urged in December, the U.S. needs a national strategy to get affordable broadband to every man, woman and child by the end of the decade.

In the 21st century, affordable high-speed Internet service is crucial to economic growth and national competitiveness, just as telephone service was in the 20th century. One widely cited study by Criterion Economics estimates that rolling out high-speed Internet access throughout the nation would add \$500 billion to the economy and create 1.2 million jobs.

Education, entertainment, shopping, business, government, medicine - everything functions more efficiently with a fast Internet connection.

This has been a mantra for Silicon Valley technology companies, but they must stop chanting and start pushing for a real broadband policy - it's good for the public and good for their business.

The federal government's lack of leadership in this area is a disgrace. Despite a 2004

promise by President Bush to deliver "universal, affordable access to broadband technology by the year 2007," his administration has done nothing to advance that goal.

Last month, the Federal Communications Commission, chaired by Bush appointee Kevin Martin, launched yet another study of the sorry state of broadband service in this country.

The U.S. needs action, not another study.

In a meeting last week with the Mercury News editorial board, Martin, who advocates a free-market approach to broadband, urged patience. When television goes fully digital in 2009, he said, the current analog spectrum will be available for use by wireless Internet providers. They will start building networks to compete with cable and telephone companies.

But why should we have to wait for long-term competition that might or might not emerge?

Cable and telephone operators can offer higher speeds now if they want to - but they won't do it unless they are pushed by customers and regulators.

The challenge is more difficult for telephone companies, whose aging copper wires can't deliver top speeds. But when the FCC approved SBC's merger with AT&T last year, the agency missed an opportunity to require the companies to upgrade their technology to offer customers better service.

For cable operators like Comcast, the dominant cable company in Silicon Valley, the issue is less a matter of technology than of will.

Comcast offers Bay Area residential customers a maximum speed of 6 Mbps - better than the alternatives, but not enough for high-definition video or for a family to smoothly share among several computers via WiFi.

In four East Coast cities where the company competes with the 50 Mbps FiOS service offered by Verizon, Comcast offers 16 Mbps for just \$63 - \$20 more than it charges here for one-third the speed. "It makes sense to test these new speeds in competitive markets," a Comcast spokesman explained.

It also makes sense to test them in the country's most wired market.

Silicon Valley, the capital of the technology world, shouldn't be stuck in the slow lane. Customers must demand better.

To watch an exclusive video interview with FCC Chairman Kevin Martin and learn more about the issue of universal broadband, visit Editorial Writer Vindu Goel's blog at <http://www.merccextra.com/blogs/vindu>.