

## **On-ramp to opportunity**

Bringing high-speed Internet to isolated communities is a worthwhile public investment

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Comparing the Internet to a highway is a tired cliché. But it's apt in the case of bringing the Web to Chesterhill, a remote Appalachian town in Morgan County where the trees and rugged landscape make infrastructure upgrades difficult. An array of satellite dishes, one lashed to the Chesterhill water tower, has been transmitting a Web signal for the past few months. As soon as more residents are trained and online, it will be as if the state had built a four lane road directly through the village, connecting it with all major Ohio cities.



This scene is unfolding in small towns all over the country. States are looking at ways to bridge the digital divide for people cut off geographically from many opportunities.

The Connecting Rural Ohio partnership, made up of several technology groups, Ohio State University and Ohio University, has been doing this worthy work since 2002. The first beneficiary was the town of New Straitsville in Perry County, which shares the same problems as Chesterhill. Funding comes from several sources, including the American Distance Education Consortium.

Only 6.3 percent of Chesterhill's 305 residents have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with the national average of 24 percent, and 16 percent of Chesterhill adults live below the poverty line. Those who do have Internet access had been limited to slow, tedious dial-up connections. Businesses made do with telephones.

Beside the geography, a key problem has been that the demand for highspeed Internet is low in sparsely populated areas, so service providers don't see any potential for profit. Once the government gets the ball rolling, the market has a chance to develop. Providers then swoop in to offer competition.

Access to online academic courses might encourage people to earn their high-school diplomas and college degrees. Residents might telecommute to jobs previously out of reach.

Businesses could thrive with high-speed Web access, as the Posy Place flower shop is hoping. The owner has been losing out on Web business because she can use only the telephone for orders, and she hands over 20 percent of her profits to FTD, the floral delivery service. High-speed Internet will eliminate the middleman.

The effectiveness of the training will be the key; a town could have the fastest Web connection in the world, but that means nothing if no one understands how to use it and for what purpose.

Ohio's poor economic indicators might be greatly improved simply by linking more people in Appalachia with education and jobs. If a highspeed Web connection pulls Chesterhill and New Straitsville up by their bootstraps, the state should take notice and help that success to spread.