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Microsoft Implores Congress: Fund Broadband Connectivity

Company president Brad Smith urges lawmakers to include broadband expansion funding as part of a coronavirus stimulus package. As millions are working and studying from home, Internet connectivity is no longer an option.

GEOFF BAKER, THE SEATTLE TIMES | MAY 21, 2020 | NEWS

(TNS) — Microsoft President Brad Smith is calling for immediate congressional action to improve broadband connectivity for rural communities by funding it as part of a coronavirus relief package.

In a post scheduled to publish Thursday to the Microsoft on the Issues blog, Smith said the funding is urgently needed in the next stimulus bill so millions of additional Americans have access to educational, medical, employment and other services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Smith said the pandemic and government directives urging 316 million Americans to stay in and work from home if possible have acted "as an accelerant" that's driven essential activities online and made it imperative to "close the broadband gap'' for those lacking high speed internet.

"The COVID-19 virus has created a national crisis,'' Smith wrote. "But it has

also created an important opportunity. It's time to galvanize the nation and recognize the obvious. Broadband has become the electricity of the 21st century.

"Well before the end of the 20th century, we recognized that no American should live without electricity. As we embark on the third decade of the 21st century, every American deserves the opportunity to access broadband.''

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Smith said funding is needed in the next stimulus bill to improve connectivity so students and teachers can use remote learning tools by the fall. Others, he said, need more access to doctors and telehealth options and to work from home or file unemployment insurance claims.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) estimated last month that about 18 million people nationwide lack access to broadband — 14 million in rural areas. But BroadbandNow Research, which tracks high-speed accessibility nationwide, says the FCC's soon-to-be-changed data collection method is flawed – counting an entire block of homes as having access if only a single residence achieves a connection — and that the actual number of people without broadband is more like 42 million.

Smith wants additional funding given to the FCC so it can implement new broadband mapping legislation that will more accurately track the lack of connectivity. From there, he wants Congress to deploy targeted funding to address problem areas so they can be quickly remedied – as in providing rural access in time for the start of the next school year — with as little bureaucracy as possible.
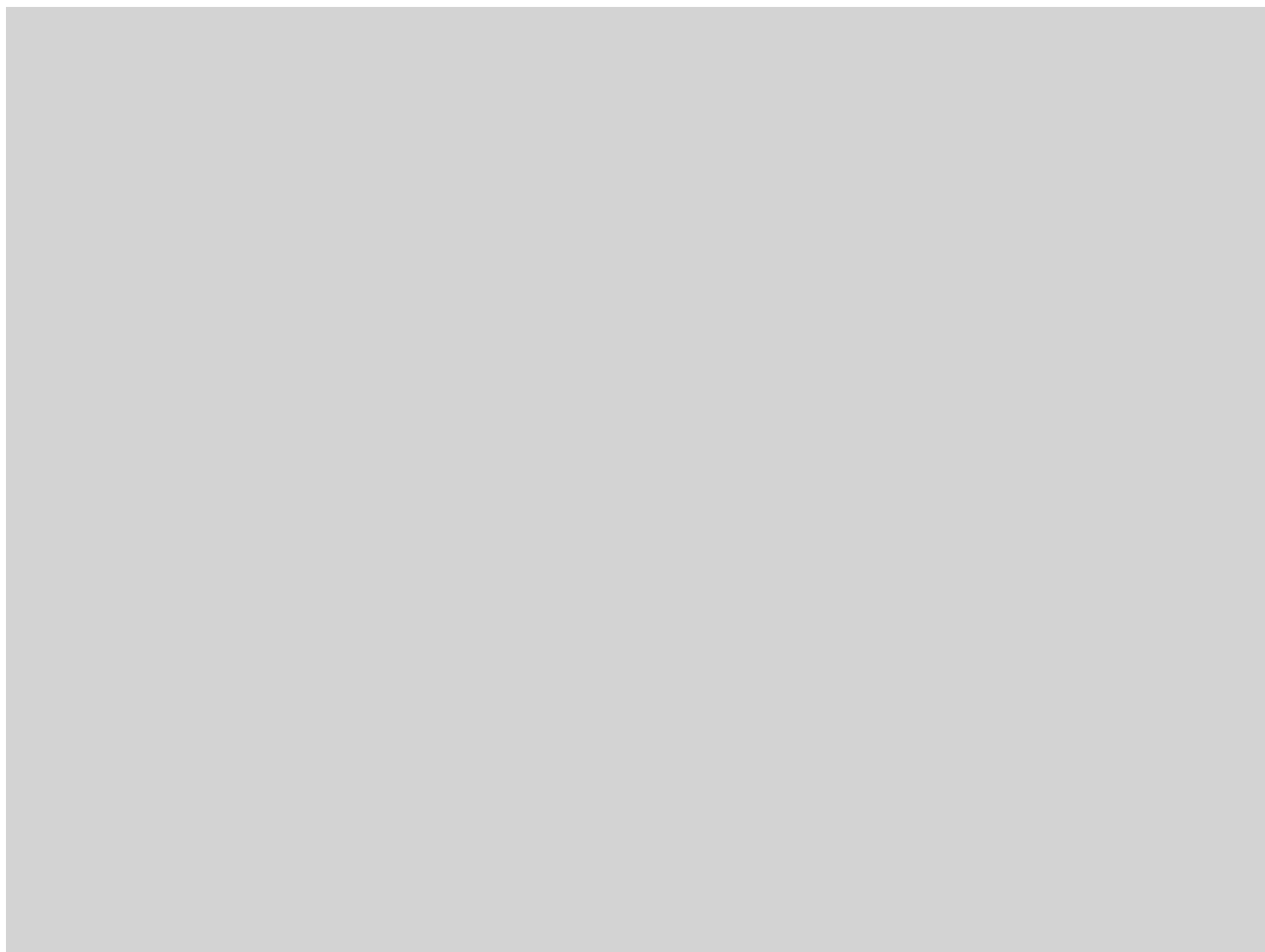
He said the Microsoft Airband Initiative, in which the software giant partners with state and local governments, private companies and nonprofits to increase the reach of broadband, had expanded the service to nearly 600,000 more people in the first three months of this year — and 1.2 million overall since the start of last year. That's up from 24,000 in all of 2018.

But he added that the federal government needs to "step up and meet us halfway" during the pandemic through building greater connectivity in outlying areas.

"This is especially important," he wrote, "because in times of economic

downturn, states are more cash-strapped than usual and don't have resources necessary to make these critical investments."

And Smith said the need for those investments will extend beyond the current crisis.

"We will eventually come out the other end of the COVID-19 crisis, but the future that emerges will look different from the world we left when this crisis began," he wrote. "The future of commerce, work, medicine, education, and services will have changed – and in some instances, permanently."

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From July 1, 2018, to July 1, 2019, the city saw its population grow just 1.5 percent. Seattle is now sixth for growth among the 50 most-populous cities; previously it had been in the top two for the last six years.

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