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Opinion

Commentary: Broadband is a necessary utility. Let's treat it like one

By **Marshall Stewart**

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There was a time when telephone lines did not span the U.S., proudly marking the landscape in nearly every conceivable populated area. But telephones, as with refrigerators and lightbulbs before them, soon became essential.

Now, as the internet is increasingly becoming an important medium for just about everything in society — communication, currency, education, the job marketplace and health care, to name only a few — it's time we acknowledge that high speed internet access is not a luxury. It's a necessary utility, and like every essential invention and service that came before, it needs comprehensive infrastructure to support it.

The ongoing pandemic has made Missouri's troubling lack of broadband infrastructure more apparent than ever. Our state ranks 41st in broadband access, with hotspots in St. Louis and Kansas City and vast stretches of little or no access throughout the rest of the state. As a result, untold numbers of Missourians have found the transition to an online society of virtual health screenings and remote business to be difficult or impossible. Video conferences have become the de-facto method of communication for many businesses across the country, but without broadband internet, they are useless.

With such a large and obvious gap in access between urban and rural communities, the disparities in health and economic prosperity between the two can only increase. That's bad news during a pandemic — those with chronic conditions might not be able to communicate with physicians to refill vital prescriptions, and rural residents who commute to an urban workplace could lose their jobs if they are unable to work from home. Even in times of relative calm and normalcy, however, to be without broadband internet is to fall behind as the world moves on.

And if our citizens are falling behind, then our state as a whole is racing to the bottom.

Rural Missourians already face higher rates of obesity and related health issues, are more likely to be uninsured and even have a lower life expectancy due to spotty access to health care. With more than 30% of the state's population living in rural areas, these health disparities are nothing less than a crisis. But while expanded internet access could help alleviate many of these inequities, its absence is deepening the divide.

We cannot continue to let that happen. At the University of Missouri System and MU Extension, we are reaching out to communities like Bollinger County — in which only 2% of computers are connected to broadband internet — with workshops and partnerships designed to build up broadband infrastructure where it is needed most.

Bollinger County hosted the first of these workshops, which brought together faculty, researchers and community leaders to begin creating a roadmap for the county to find the resources and partnerships it needs to bring broadband access to everyone in the county. On July 8, these partners will reconvene in a public webinar to share their progress. Beyond the benefits to residents of Bollinger County, their work will also serve as a template for future projects throughout Missouri.

While I am proud that the UM System is leading the charge on this issue, we can't be alone in this fight. Delivering reliable and cost-effective broadband to everyone in Missouri will require buy-in at every level: Legislators, communities, businesses and individuals all have a part to play in blanketing the state in high speed internet. Let's come together, as we did for electricity and telephones, to build the next great leap in American infrastructure.

Marshall Stewart is the UM System Chief Engagement Officer and MU Vice Chancellor for Extension and Engagement.