


Local

Officials: ConnectGRADD may be the answer to troubled KentuckyWired initiative

 By Jacob Mulliken Messenger-Inquirer

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Whether in the holler or the middle of town, internet connectivity is a major issue in Kentucky.

The state, in the form of former Gov. Steve Beshear's KentuckyWired initiative, has tried to address this issue through providing an essential highway (middle-mile) of the internet network to which commercial companies can connect in order to build a "last-mile" stretch of access provided by an internet service provider to areas and communities that are often without reliable internet access.

The issue with the roughly \$324 million project is that "middle-mile," and the fact that private sector internet providers, even with the middle-mile, can't justify providing internet access to more rural communities.

Overall, the state's KentuckyWired initiative is a "joke," said state Sen. Matt Castlen.

"First and foremost, I am a fan of the private sector," he said. "I don't care for government doing business at all. The private sector has proven time and time again that they can do it better. High-speed internet is the modern day equivalent of providing electricity and water services to rural areas. Whatever you are doing, there are so many things that require internet. KentuckyWired, in my opinion, is one of the biggest jokes that we have fallen for. I have seen the amount of money that they continue to ask for, and I am so disappointed in the project, especially in how little Western Kentucky has benefited."

While KentuckyWired has left a bad taste in the mouths of many state and community leaders, the Green River Area Development District's ConnectGRADD internet initiative is starting to gain statewide attention.

On Nov. 20, Daviess County Judge-Executive Al Mattingly and GRADD Executive Director Jiten Shah were invited to Lexington to present the history, successes and lessons learned through the ConnectGRADD process to the 17 county officials that make up the Bluegrass Area Development District in Lexington.

ConnectGRADD is a partnership between QWireless and GRADD that provides internet services to the rural areas to GRADD's seven-member counties of Daviess, Hancock, Henderson, McLean, Ohio, Union, Webster, as well as new member Hopkins County.

Now, many counties involved in the Bluegrass Area Development District, such as Fayette, Madison, Franklin, Garrard and Scott, are looking to adopt the ConnectGRADD structure, said Scott County Judge-Executive Joe Pat Covington.

"One of the biggest issues in Scott County is rural broadband access," he said. "It is the major infrastructure issue of our time. We have been working on and meeting with providers and the issue always comes down to volume -- some of these communities just don't have enough people to attract bigger providers. KentuckyWired is a mess, and we can't

rely on that to serve our people. ConnectGRADD has been doing this for so long, I was shocked that no one had followed their lead. I started researching and it was obvious that that approach is one we could definitely model."

ConnectGRADD has not been an easy row to hoe, but it has, as a continuously evolving project, done exactly what it was supposed to do -- provide internet access, said Mattingly.

"The big boys won't go to many of these places. They can't justify it," he said. "We didn't get into ConnectGRADD to make money -- all of those funds go right back into evolving the system. That is what we laid out for the Bluegrass Area Development District, They were very interested in what we have done. We described our partnership with QWireless, bringing Hopkins County on board as well as the history. I'm proud of the program, especially because we can, even with KentuckyWired, choose what entity we would deal with.

"They (KentuckyWired) have to make a profit and deliver a competitive product with other commercial carriers. We don't have to make a profit. We have to pay our bills, and we have the advantage of being able to buy competitively on that market. If they aren't competitive, then they won't be a ConnectGRADD service."

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