

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS**

Re: *August 6, 2003 Wireline Competition Bureau Report on the Growth of
Subscribership to High-Speed Service during the Last Three Years*

Today, having access to advanced communications—broadband—is every bit as important for economic opportunity as access to basic telephone service was in the past. I've referred to having both the pots and the pans—the pots being Plain Old Telephone Service and the pans being the Pretty Awesome New Stuff. Twenty-first century Americans need them both. Providing meaningful access to advanced telecommunications for all our citizens may also spell the difference between stagnation and economic revitalization. Building this infrastructure is important for all communities in this country—and it is critical for rural America. If we do this right, I believe that broadband networks will be as crucial to this new century as roads, canals and transcontinental railroads were to the Nineteenth century and the Interstate Highway System and basic telecommunications networks were to the Twentieth.

So today's report from the Wireline Competition Bureau seems like good news. We have made progress. More people around the country have access to high-speed services. We are moving forward.

But I sense a problem or two or three in how we approach all this. One is methodological. If we want to accurately gauge how our fellow citizens, including rural Americans, are reaping the full bounty of broadband communication, we need to do more than base our conclusions on the skeletal zip code data supporting today's presentation. Finding one high-speed subscriber in a zip code and counting it as service available throughout is not a credible way to proceed. We must dig deeper.

Secondly, and I guess this is methodology-plus, but basing our measurements and our objectives on a broadband revolution at 200 kilobits may be just a little passé. I mentioned the 200 kilobit figure that we use to someone the other day and the response I got was: "How 1997." I don't want to get bogged down into setting absolute standards for something that is always evolving, but I do think it may be time for us to focus on a more rigorous bandwidth standard.

Finally, I stress again the importance of our living up to our statutory duties under the 1996 Act. In Section 706, Congress directed the Commission to regularly inquire about the availability of advanced telecommunications capability to all Americans. Congress also directed the Commission to take immediate action to accelerate deployment if advanced capability is not being deployed to all Americans in a reasonable and timely fashion. I think we have a lot of work to do to meet these twin charges.

We are not inquiring frequently enough. When the Commission undertook its first Section 706 inquiry, it stated that the agency would inquire annually into the

deployment of broadband. Yet it has been a full two years since the Commission released its last Notice of Inquiry under Section 706. I question how this Commission can even consider far-reaching deregulatory action with respect to broadband without up-to-date data from current and ongoing Section 706 studies.

When we do another Section 706 study—and I hope that will be soon—we need to dig deeper than we have in the past. We need to be awake to the possibility that there might be a lesson or two for us in the hardscrabble experiences of other nations that enjoy higher broadband penetration rates. And let’s look at communities right here at home that have broadband choices and study why their neighbors up the road may not. We also need to ask about what role the government should take to ensure that advanced services are available for everyone, everywhere. In fact, *a lot* of municipal governments are moving ahead and deploying broadband where the private sector has been reluctant to go. We need to understand the “whys” and “hows” of this growing phenomenon much better than we do today.

If rural communities still lack access to broadband, how can we say deployment to all Americans is reasonable and timely? And what targeted actions are we taking to do something about it? In other words, what are we doing about the lingering white spaces on so many of the Bureau’s diagrams today?

I don’t have all the answers. I don’t even have all the questions that need to be asked. But I do know we need to take action to get a fuller and more accurate picture of broadband deployment and to develop some plans, or at least options, to deal with this pressing national challenge. A whole lot is riding on it in terms of economic opportunity for individual citizens and prosperity for the nation.