

**Remarks of  
Commissioner Deborah Taylor Tate  
Rural Telecommunications Congress Conference (RTC)  
October 24, 2006  
(via videotape)**

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak with you all today. I want to thank Harry Roesch and Hilda Legg for their long-lived support of rural broadband issues at all levels of government. I understand that this marks the third consecutive year in which the FCC has participated at the RTC and I am delighted to be here – even if by video. Your efforts are so very important because pushing broadband deployment out to schools, healthcare facilities, businesses, and homes is a critical building block for our competitiveness, not just for you locally, but for America globally.

Certainly, one of my top priorities is working toward the President's policy goal of universal, affordable access to broadband for every American by the end of 2007. Encouraging broadband deployment also remains one of the foremost goals of the Commission and Chairman Martin has done a commendable job of setting policies that encourage broadband deployment. From leveling the playing field between broadband providers, to targeting funds for priorities, like rural healthcare, the Commission continues to play a critical role in the expansion and improvement of our broadband infrastructure.

I know I'm preaching to the choir, but having a broadband infrastructure is critical to every sector of our economy. From e-commerce to e-government – from providing access to educational opportunities in the classroom no matter where our children go to school to re-training our workforce for the jobs of the 21st century – from financial markets to healthcare – broadband is crucial for America and Americans.

As many of you know, I'm from Tennessee, a state that has its share of challenges, including the educational challenges facing its poor and rural areas. In Tennessee, I worked with then Governor Sundquist to ensure that all of our schools were connected to the Internet. In fact, Tennessee was the very first state to accomplish this and I'm very proud of what we've been able to do in classrooms from the inner city to Appalachia. Giving our students the tools and skills to compete in the increasingly competitive global economy is essential if our country is to remain a leader. I continue to hear wonderful success stories about how connections improve our educational system, often for students in the most isolated areas. The e-rate director in Alaska recently recounted to me how high school students on a remote island invariably drop out of school, rather than spend the winter away from home to attend their "local" high school, miles away on a different island. Recent broadband connections between the high school and the home island, however, have allowed several students the remarkable ability to graduate by participating in their high school from their home island using the broadband connectivity. When these students graduated, you'll be happy to know that the technology also enabled their parents and the entire island to participate in the graduation ceremony via video

conference. By the way, the two students were valedictorian and salutatorian of their class!

Just as those students in Alaska were able to participate from afar via broadband, folks in rural America are able to participate in the global economy. Broadband is becoming a vital element of our infrastructure for business development keeping our nation on the leading edge of our rapidly changing world. It allows people to connect with business associates, colleagues, researchers, and clients around the globe.

By connecting people, broadband can also prove helpful to government. Not only does it assist with the consumer services of e-government – driver’s licenses, taxes, individual school information, but even knowing where child predators may live. The explosion of information at our fingertips about what our government is doing is astounding. It also enables a level of participation in government that didn’t previously exist. The FCC, for example, enables anyone with an interest in a Commission proceeding to file comments, read others’ comments, or watch a Commission meeting via the Internet. While this is probably not at the top of your ‘must see’ viewing list, I believe the openness encourages a healthy participation in government by citizens across the country, not just those in DC.

As both a state commissioner and now at the FCC, I have been fortunate to work to promote programs that assist people with disabilities, like telecommunications relay service. Broadband is also revolutionizing communications for the deaf and hard of hearing. The FCC administers support for IP relay and Video Relay Services, the latter allowing for the first time communications to take place in a deaf person’s native language – sign language – with direct video connections between two people signing, or including an interpreter in the middle. Services like this ensure that all Americans have the tools to participate fully in society.

I have also been excited to remain involved with health issues. The FCC has a far broader role in health care than most Americans think. From approving waivers for diabetes and cardiac monitoring devices to promoting the advancement of broadband networks that support telehealth services, spreading the reach of the latest health technology and services. It has been exciting for me to see first-hand across the country – from Tennessee to Alaska – how new technologies combined with broadband enable everything from remote surgery to telepsychiatry, and teledentistry. I have witnessed first-hand how the technology at both a research hospital and one of the most remote communities in the U.S. link up and work together not only to improve people’s health and lives, but also to narrow the miles between doctor and patient – not to mention reducing healthcare costs.

Broadband networks also will enable the development of electronic medical records. Centerstone, the largest behavioral health provider in Tennessee, is leading efforts toward improved outcomes through electronic medical records and sharing research-based “best practices” with mental health centers across the country. They help

to address a myriad of health issues, from mental illness to obesity and its oft associated disease, diabetes.

You may have heard that Chairman Martin and I, along with Senator Brownback, recently launched a task force to review the relationship between media and childhood obesity. As you know, childhood obesity is a national epidemic affecting one in five children. Regional health partnerships, like the Delta Telehealth Partnership, are collaborating to bring quality diabetes care to some of the most critical locations in the rural delta. I hope to have your input and support in stemming childhood obesity in your state or community as we move forward.

The Commission has been busy lately encouraging broadband for telehealth. For years, the FCC has administered a program to support rural healthcare telecommunications connections costs. Unfortunately, this program has been underutilized. In fact, only about 10% of the \$400 million allocated limit is ever used. Recently, however, the FCC unanimously adopted an Order establishing a pilot program to facilitate regional health networks and connections to Internet2.

I felt strongly about the item because it acknowledges and encourages the incredible benefits broadband can bring to our nation's public and non-profit healthcare facilities. We drew on the strong support in the Telecommunications Act recognizing the importance of rural health care facilities to the deployment of broadband throughout our nation. It was important that we explore an approach to encourage innovative health practices, especially in the rural and remote areas of the country where health care has often been more difficult and expensive to provide. To me, what is most notable about the pilot program is that it shifts the focus away from individual connections toward a focus on building networks. The program seeks to connect numerous healthcare facilities in a state or region by tying together rural and remote centers with the urban hospitals. Isn't that a more appropriate way to look at this issue? The existing rural health efforts I have seen are successful exactly because of this focus on building a network, rather than a simple one-sided connection.

I know that the pilot rural health program, even if it eventually takes full wing, may address only some of the many issues you all deal with on a daily basis and I know that challenges remain. Who will pay for the equipment in the hospitals to make the broadband connections valuable? Who will operate this equipment and how do we train them? How does a healthcare facility justify these costs? Well, I'm not here to tell you that I necessarily have these answers for you, or a pot of Uncle Sam's gold to pass around. However, know that we are trying to seek solutions that will advance the benefits of telehealth and we also seek your input and applaud your efforts now and in the future.

Finally, I want to touch on something that impacts Americans throughout our nation – public safety and homeland security. The memories of 9/11 and the Gulf coast hurricanes last year remain powerful reminders of the importance of our communications infrastructure to our ability to respond to disasters – whether man-made or delivered by mother nature. It is essential that our broadband infrastructure helps to ensure that our

public safety networks are interoperable and redundant. There are some things you can prepare for and some things you cannot. We would be remiss if we failed to build on our experiences. At the same time, we must also insure that our plans accommodate disasters of all types, such as contamination of our food or water supplies or a pandemic flu.

Accordingly, the Commission last month announced the creation of a new bureau dedicated specifically to address public safety and homeland security issues. While the Commission has acted admirably in the face of crises before – the response to the hurricanes last year was tremendous – I am pleased that the Commission recognized the importance of putting its subject matter experts in this area under a single roof to ensure coordinated thinking about how best to focus our energies and improve our policies for preparedness. In fact, the website for the new Bureau has excellent materials which I recommend to you for your business and your family – we all must have an emergency plan.

I hope that we continue to maintain a dialogue on the rollout of broadband networks throughout our country. I know that with you today are experts from the FCC who will help you further understand the Commission's broadband deployment efforts. Bob Sommers from the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau is our point person on outreach for rural broadband deployment. Also with you are representatives from the Wireline and Wireless Bureaus who can help explain our various efforts to encourage broadband deployment, including the recent rural health care pilot initiative I discussed. We value your participation in this conference and hope to learn from you what is working on the ground floor of broadband deployment at the local, state, and regional level.

In closing, I want to underscore and applaud your efforts and I look forward to hearing about the exciting ideas and projects you all are working on as you work to propel our nation forward using the power of broadband.

Thank you, Harry, and have a terrific meeting!