

A. Broadband Access Committee

Commissioner Folk gave a brief history of the Committee's existence and mission, and noted that the Committee's newly-issued report, "Improving Broadband Access and Quality in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois" is now available on the Commission website.

[http://archive.ci.champaign.il.us/archive/dsweb/Get/Document-10009/Broadband%20Access%20Committee_s%20Final%20Report.pdf]

Commissioner Folk presented a summary of the report's findings:

--Ten core qualities of a broadband network were seen as universal accessibility, equitable distribution, reliability, security, public nature, openness, a long-term investment, education, innovation and collaboration.

--Five of these values were seen as particular problem areas in C-U, some of which (affordability, equitability and ubiquity of access, connectedness and collaboration) were described as stagnant, and one of which (public-interest network management) was described as a failure.

-- The Committee recommends that the cities initiate a broadband adoption task force, separate from UC2B, to promote and subsidize connections and computers (in a limited fashion) for those who cannot otherwise afford them.

--Funding will be a problem. Schools will need to become involved, and grant support should be sought by the task force, as well as right-of-way fees.

--The Committee recommends the formation of an innovation clearinghouse to promote the innovative and collaborative use of broadband in C-U.

--The Committee recommends the creation of a Digital Ombudsman position to respond to internet issues in the same way the Cable Commission and PEG Station Managers respond to citizen problems with cable television service from providers.

--Current community initiatives as regards broadband and the digital divide were noted by the Committee.

At the invitation of Commissioner Folk, Donald Owen and Roger Grinnip made brief presentations on activities in these areas in Urbana and Champaign public schools, respectively. They include a Digital Literacy Course being put in place in Urbana Middle School, the implementation of Moodle as a teaching tool, remote collaborations between schools, and parent access to student records, among other developments. Mr. Grinnip noted that the mobile device, its software, and knowledge of how to use it, are the bases of future digital broadband activity across all socio-economic classes.

Brian Bell then described the work of the Digital Equality Initiative, ongoing at Parkland College in collaboration with Volo Broadband. Low – income citizens lack access to technology (the hardware), central to literacy in the modern world. The Initiative hopes to use waste resources (used computers from corporations, e.g.) to solve the problem by becoming a conduit for those resources to be recycled and put in use by those who need them, with the collaboration of such institutions as the U of I and the Independent Media Center.

Chris Ritzo of the Independent Media Center in Urbana then spoke of the ongoing digital initiatives at the IMC, including a public computer lab and a free help desk staffed by volunteers and Americorps workers, a Maker Fair, and a free open broadband wireless network advocacy group.

Professor Abdul Alkalimat provided a political and social context for the work of UC2B, as society (and C-U) move “from the actual, to the virtual, to the new actual.” He described the new group C3 (Community Computerization Committee) as one of the avenues of digital change. 143 anchor social institutions were identified by UC2B, the only project in the US that included the smaller social agencies and organizations; an annual congress of representatives of those institutions is envisioned. EBlackCU, another local initiative, aims to document, archive and digitize the records and history of C/U’s African-American community. Professor Alkalimat also stressed the need to change the laws to create an easier way for the university and city governments to recycle their used computers to the local community, and for the university to provide more of its expertise and individuals in support of the local community’s digital needs. He concluded with remarks on the transition of society from an industrial base to an information base, and the importance of addressing the issues involved with the transition of workers from one to the other.

Commissioner Folk remarked on the need to be able to effectively transfer the information and expertise garnered locally from user to user and project to project, using the digitization project of eBlackCU as an example--a role that the proposed Innovation Clearinghouse would fill. He also brought to the public’s attention the new nationwide Comcast Internet Essentials initiative, similarly aimed at putting technology in the hands of low-income families. Forty percent of the population is currently not online, and it is the hope of the BAC that their report will help to substantially reduce that percentage locally.

9. AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

None.

10. SET NEXT MEETING DATE AND ADJOURNMENT

The next regular meeting will be held in one week on October 19, 2011, in the Urbana City Hall Chambers at 4 pm. Commissioner Walker adjourned the meeting at 5:29 pm.