Broadband Roundtable Town-Hall Meeting at COVITS

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The 2007 COVITS (Commonwealth of Virginia Innovative Technology Symposium), hosted by Virginia Secretary of Technology Aneesh P. Chopra, took place September 17th-18th at the Westfields Marriott & Conference Center. In its ninth year and first visit to Northern Virginia, COVITS attracted senior-level executives and decision makers in technology from state and local government, business, and education. This year's conference also served as the venue for a "town-hall" style meeting for the recently announced Broadband Roundtable. The Broadband Roundtable, which is co-chaired by Mark Warner, Former Governor of Virginia, and Secretary Chopra, is divided into sub-committees (Broadband Adoption Measurement, Technology Blueprint, Innovative Applications, Business Models, and Community Outreach) and consists of what most would agree, is a true all-star cast of the public and private sectors. Arguably, the most notable members of the Roundtable are Dr. Raj Singh and Dr. Bob Kahn. The former is a humble billionaire and pioneer of the wireless industry. The latter is widely regarded as one of the founders of the internet. Dr. Ted Rappaport, founder of TSR Technologies, Inc. and Wireless Valley Communications, Inc., and electrical engineering professor at the University of Texas will be the staff advisor to the Broadband Roundtable.

Dr. Rappaport was also present at this Town-Hall Meeting, along with other members of the Roundtable that were there to showcase each of the sub-committee's current efforts and future plans of action, as well as engage all attendees in a discussion about the lack of broadband access in Virginia. During these discussions, the digital divide in the Commonwealth became painfully obvious and very real; as even members of the Roundtable made it known that they found themselves without access to high-speed internet at home. Fortunately, the Roundtable is taking it back to basics, and has charged the Broadband Adoption Measurement sub-committee with first defining the key metrics of which technologies and speeds constitute broadband, for Virginia. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), broadband service is generally defined as "data transmission speeds exceeding 200 kilobits per second (Kbps), or 200,000 bits per second, in at least one direction."

The FCC's definition has been heavily criticized by customer advocacy groups as being "ridiculously low", especially in comparison to other nations of the world. For instance, The National Broadband Task Force of Canada described broadband in its June 2001 report as: "... a high-capacity, two-way link between end user and access network suppliers capable of supporting full-motion interactive video applications" with a "minimum symmetrical speed of 1.5 megabits per second per individual user. It should be no surprise that the United States is ranked 15th in the world in broadband subscribers per 100 inhabitants, according to the December 2006 Broadband Statistics Report from the OECD. In the United States, Georgia is currently leading the way in broadband, with Alaska in the #2 spot (which jumped from 50th in 2002). Still, the Commonwealth of Virginia, which ranks 13th in the nation, remains ambitious in its broadband efforts. In fact, Governor Tim Kaine calls for 20% of eligible Virginia state workers to telework by 2009, and that all businesses in Virginia have access to broadband by 2010.

GovWin's take:

The Broadband Roundtable's ongoing efforts may require future vendor assistance, as they evaluate and empower local partnerships through the Public-Private Educational Facilities Infrastructure Act (PPEA) to meet the Governor's goals and initiatives for high-speed internet in the Commonwealth.