FCC's National Broadband Plan - Are the Goals Achievable?

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The FCC recently unveiled its National Broadband Plan to Congress outlining specific recommendations for policy makers to work on over the next decade to ensure that every American and business has access to affordable mobile broadband. Congress asked the FCC to come up with a comprehensive plan to expand broadband access throughout the nation with the hopes of increasing economic growth, jobs, global competitiveness, thus improving life quality.

The report sited that 35% of adult Americans lack high-speed Internet access at home; and those of us who do have it are experiencing much slower speeds than users in other nations. This statistic caught me by surprise since by the FCC's own account, the number of Americans who have broadband at home has grown from eight million in 2000 to almost 200 million in 2009.

According to FCC Chairman Julius Benachoski, the plan sets ambitious but achievable goals, including 1-gigabit connections to every community; affordable 100 megabits broadband to 100 million households; and raising adoption from 65% to 90%, heading to 100%. The plan also commits the United States to global leadership in mobile innovation, with the fastest and most extensive wireless networks of any nation. That's a pretty tall order by any standard.

After reading an Executive Summary of the plan, I felt some critical issues were left rather ambiguous. For example, where is this additional spectrum coming from? Who is going to pay for these increased services? And will there still be enough spectrum left over to sustain the current and future growth of mobile data consumption? Right now the FCC has only 50 MHz of spectrum in inventory. If enacted, the National Broadband Plan will free up 500 MHz of spectrum over the next decade, of which 300 MHz will be made available for mobile within the next five years.

There lies the rub. One of the most controversial issues is the proposed reallocation of wireless spectrum. The report recommends that the FCC reallocate about 20 MHz of underutilized government spectrum and also recommends that the agency reallocates about 120 MHz of spectrum from TV broadcasters. The plan proposes incentives to encourage TV broadcasters to re-auction their licenses or voluntarily giving up a large portion of the spectrum. They're kidding right?

The unveiling of this plan is only the first step in laying the ground work for expanding affordable broadband access; and I agree it is a necessary one. These initiatives will stimulate economic growth and job creation. Hopefully they will also increase opportunities to improve education, healthcare, homeland security and

reduce our energy consumption. There is a tremendous amount to gain, but it will still come with a hefty price tag for private industry and taxpayers. The best thing lawmakers can do to ensure that this plan will succeed is to be realistic about their goals and keep the process as transparent as possible.

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