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Columns

Ed. Note: We asked Jim Baller and company, the Washington broadband experts, to explore the views of the presidential candidates on FTTH and broadband. While still in the race, they decided not to include Ron Paul or Mike Huckabee, who are decidedly longshots at this point. We also note the possibility that Al Gore may come in as a peacemaker to what some believe may be a chaotic Democratic convention. If there is any chance of that happening, we will present Gore's views about broadband, including his apparent father of the Internet claim, laughable in some circles.

The Presidential Candidates: How They View Broadband

By Jim Baller and Casey Lide, Baller-Herbst

Senators Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and John McCain differ on many major issues, but when it comes to broadband deployment, they appear to agree on most points, either explicitly or tacitly. To be sure, they do differ in some significant ways, but these differences do not appear to be irreconcilable.

Of the three, Obama has provided the most detail about his broadband policies. On his campaign website, Obama states that he understands the “immense transformative power of technology and innovation,” and therefore seeks to “encourage the deployment of the most modern communications infrastructure” that “can be used by government and business to reduce the costs of health care, help solve our energy crisis, create new jobs, and fuel our economic growth.” An Obama administration, he says, “Will ensure America remains competitive in the global economy.” He then goes on to discuss at some length his support for network neutrality, diversity of media ownership, improve government service.

Turning to next-generation broadband, Obama states that America “deserves the finest and most modern communications infrastructure in the world.” More specifically, he states:

Deploy Next-Generation Broadband: Barack Obama believes that America should lead the world in broadband penetration and Internet access. As a country, we have ensured that every American has access to telephone service and electricity, regardless of economic status, and Obama will do likewise for broadband Internet access. Full broadband penetration can enrich democratic discourse, enhance competition, provide economic growth, and bring significant consumer benefits. Moreover, improving our infrastructure will foster competitive markets for Internet access and services that ride on that infrastructure. Obama believes we can get true broadband to every community in America through a combination of reform of the Universal Service Fund, better use of the nation’s wireless spectrum, promotion of next-generation facilities, technologies and applications, and new tax and loan incentives.

He then goes on to discuss several specific steps, including redefining “broadband” from the FCC’s current 200 Kbps to the “speeds demanded by 21st century business and communications;” amending the Universal Service Program to replace support for voice communications at a time certain with support for affordable broadband, focusing specifically on un-served areas; overhauling restrictive current policies on wireless spectrum; ensuring that schools, libraries, households and hospitals have access to next-generation networks as well as adequate training and resources to use them to full advantage; and providing federal support for public/private partnerships at the local level.

Most recently, Obama has proposed a program entitled “New National Infrastructure Investment” to “rebuild America’s national transportation infrastructure – its highways, bridges, roads, ports, air, and train systems – to strengthen user safety, bolster our long-term competitiveness and ensure our economy continues to grow.” The program will include a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank funded by \$60 billion over 10 years, which Obama predicts will create a million new jobs.

For her part, Clinton in numerous campaign speeches has explicitly called for “a National Broadband Strategy.” Senator Clinton’s campaign website briefly elaborates as follows:

Support initiatives to establish leadership in broadband. Under the Bush administration, the country that invented the Internet has slipped to 25th in the global rankings for broadband deployment. In order to accelerate the deployment of sophisticated networks, Hillary Clinton proposes that the federal government provide tax incentives to encourage broadband deployment in underserved areas. She also proposes financial support for state and local broadband initiatives. Various municipal broadband initiatives are underway around the country to accelerate the deployment of high speed networks. The initiatives are useful for education, commerce, technology development, and the efficient provision of municipal services.

The statement quoted above is not a stand-alone policy but part of Senator Clinton’s “Innovation Agenda,” a 9-point plan “to renew the nation’s commitment to research; help create the premier science, engineering, technology and mathematics workforce; and upgrade our innovation infrastructure.”¹ It is also part of Senator Clinton’s infrastructure plan called “Rebuild America Plan.”

As she recently explained in an interview published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*,

The degradation of America's infrastructure isn't just a serious threat to the safety of Americans; it is also a threat to our homeland security and our economy - something I experienced first-hand as Senator of New York during 9/11. This is why I've set forth a Rebuild America Plan. Along with emergency initiatives that will invest billions of dollars to deal with critical infrastructure plans, conduct immediate safety reviews of high priority and high risk assets and review the safety certification process and standards, my Rebuild America Plan includes specific strategies to modernize our infrastructure in public transit, seaports and intercity passenger rail while also addressing congestion, traffic growth and broadband networks

Clinton has also been a long-time supporter of legislation to spur economic development in rural areas through broadband initiatives. This includes sponsorship of bills such as the Rural Investment to Strengthen Our Economy Act and the Rural Broadband Initiatives Act.² Senator Clinton is also a supporter of net neutrality, particularly through her sponsorship of the Internet Freedom Preservation Act.

John McCain has not said much in public about a national broadband strategy, but his few words, and especially his deeds, are very revealing. For example, in November 2006, McCain and Cisco CEO John Chambers were asked what single thing Congress could do that would have the biggest impact on innovation. They responded as follows:

Chambers: Broadband. We need to put the rhetoric on the back burner and need to focus on making broadband a priority in the United States. We need a national broadband plan. We need to change the current FCC broadband measurement of 200Kpbs to 100 or even 500 times faster. The U.S. is falling behind on broadband and without leadership and focus we will continue to do so.

McCain: I agree with John.

Although McCain is a strong advocate of private enterprise, he was one of the first members of Congress to sponsor federal legislation that would prohibit states from enacting or enforcing measures that would interfere with public broadband initiatives. The essence of McCain's position on this is reflected in the following excerpt from his floor statement introducing the Lautenberg-McCain Community Broadband Act of 2005:

This bill is needed if we are to meet President Bush's call for "universal, affordable access for broadband technology by the year 2007." When President Bush announced this nationwide goal in 2004, the country was ranked 10th in the world for high-speed Internet penetration. Today, the country is ranked 16th. This is unacceptable for a country that should lead the world in technical innovation, economic development, and international competitiveness.

Many of the countries outpacing the United States in the deployment of high-speed Internet services, including Canada, Japan, and South Korea, have successfully combined municipal systems with privately deployed networks to wire their countries. As a country, we cannot afford to cut off any successful strategy if we want to remain internationally competitive.

I recognize that our Nation has a long and successful history of private investment in critical communications infrastructure. That history must be respected, protected, and continued. However, when private industry does not answer the call because of market failures or other obstacles, it is appropriate and even commendable, for the people acting through their local governments to improve their lives by investing in their own future.

On other issues, Senator McCain defies easy classification. For example, he supports greater concentration of media ownership, supports a la carte cable programming, and "in general" opposes net neutrality legislation.

Conclusions

Senators Obama, Clinton, and McCain all support the concept of a National Broadband Strategy, and they apparently agree on many of the details. There are some significant differences – most notably on network neutrality – but there may be room for compromise. Under these unique circumstances, advocates of a National Broadband Strategy should, whenever possible, prod the candidates to spell out their positions in greater detail. Advocates should also do their homework now to be prepared to participate effectively in the national dialog on a National Broadband Strategy that will surely occur in the months ahead