



THE STOUFFER REPORT

Senator Bill Stouffer
Senate District 21

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Jefferson City, MO 65101

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Contact: Aaron Baker
(573) 751-1507

Cultivating Rural Missouri

In the tradition of New Year's resolutions, I've come up with my own. Any time anyone in the Capitol asks what they can do for me, "Bring technology to Rural Missouri," will be my answer.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not about running down the SBCs, Sprints, or other telecommunication providers of the world—but I do think we have a lot of opportunity, and we need to bring access to 21st century technology to Rural Missouri.

If we are to effectively "Cultivate Rural Missouri," we have to begin with technology. People already want to live in rural communities that provide a safe and quiet place to raise their families, but our young people for decades have left rural areas in search of higher-paying jobs, better access to health care, and quality education. With 21st century technology, all of these should be at our fingertips.

Higher-paying jobs: I've written before about Onshore Technologies, a Web-page and software-development company in Macon. They are bringing high-paying tech jobs to North Missouri partly because a local telephone company bit the bullet and brought fiber optics to every home and business in the community. These types of technology centers stimulate the economy even in nearby communities. In Howard County, an information technology (IT) firm is opening shop to help local grocery stores establish their own discount card programs. Economic development is now about getting fiber optics to our communities. The opportunities are endless.

Better access to health care: With improvements to the economy, other benefits are quick to follow. Investments in health care are important to improving the quality of life of local residents. Today, university specialists and other doctors are available through interactive television sites throughout Rural Missouri.

Improvements in data-sharing among health care providers will also improve the industry. Don't forget the Jiffy Lube example—how can the repair shop know every detail about our last oil change, but doctors have no clue what we're allergic to and when our last tetanus shot took place?

Quality education: Wouldn't it be nice if our high school students had access to the world's finest professors or even high school instructors highly trained in a specific field? They do. Local school districts throughout Rural Missouri use interactive television, delivered through the Internet, to provide specialty, advanced or college courses. More and more, these types of tools should be used for not just students, but the entire community. University Extension and other taxpayer-funded entities should follow suit.

This type of technology allows Rural Missourians to “tele-commute” to the same jobs, health care and education as our more urban counterparts. Cultivating Rural Missouri also includes improving access to network television on satellite television, wireless and high-speed Internet connections, and reliable cell phone coverage. Wouldn't that be nice?

Working soil to its full potential is something many of us understand. It begins with proper cultivation and care. If we are to “Cultivate Rural Missouri,” we have to improve access to 21st century technology.

If you have questions or comments about this or any other issue, please call toll free (866) 768-3987 or by email at bstouffer@senate.mo.gov.

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