



MISSOURI SENATE

JEFFERSON CITY

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**A Weekly Column for the
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Making Connections

JEFFERSON CITY – We live in the Information Age – computers, the Internet, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, cell phones and texting – most of us are familiar with some or all of these forms of communication. The Internet, especially, has transformed our society by putting the world at our fingertips. For about 80% of Missouri residents, high-speed access to this vast pool of knowledge is just a click away. For the other 20%, most of whom live in rural areas of Missouri, access to the information superhighway is often slow and frustrating. This leaves our rural businesses, our local governments and our citizens at a competitive disadvantage.

This week Governor Nixon announced a plan to expand broadband Internet across Missouri. The state and Sho-Me Power and Sho-Me Technologies of Marshfield have joined together to apply for \$143-million in federal recovery funds to build 200 new broadband towers and to lay 2,500 miles of broadband fiber. If the application is approved, the state of Missouri would provide \$25-million in matching funds and Sho-Me Technologies would contribute \$8.4-million in new fiber lines. The five-year MoBroadbandNow Project will make high-speed Internet available to nearly 92% of our population.

High-speed Internet access is now widely available in most of our large cities, but the farther away you get from each urban center the harder it is to get broadband or high-speed Internet connections. By the time you reach rural Missouri – you are pretty much out of luck. In much of northeast Missouri, access to high-speed Internet ranges from 0-30% of the population.

Like I said, this puts the people in rural Missouri at a competitive disadvantage. Small businesses cannot use tools like video-conferencing to stay in touch with suppliers, our schools are limited in their ability to teach our children, and our citizens are unable to use the full

potential of today's communication technology. The MoBroadbandNow Project will eventually level the playing field for the vast majority of our citizens.

More than that, this project could dramatically improve the lives of rural Missourians by helping to create the infrastructure for Missouri hospitals and clinics to use telemedicine. It will create new markets for our small businesses throughout the state and across the globe, it will help our farmers and ranchers stay up to date with the latest best practices, and it will ensure our students are fully prepared when they enter college or the workforce.

The MoBroadbandNow Project will bring high-speed broadband connections to underserved or unserved areas of our state. Then, "last-mile" service providers like local utility or cable companies would provide Internet access to homes, businesses and other customers. One of these "last-mile" providers is the Ralls County Electric Cooperative.

I have worked over the years to try to bring high-speed Internet access to our rural communities and served on a task force a couple of years ago that looked at this very issue. Those of us who choose to live in rural areas enjoy the sense of community found in our small towns and the peace and quiet of the countryside, but we don't want to be cut off from the rest of the world. This project will eventually bring the world to us.

If you have any questions or comments about this or any other issue, give my Capitol office a call at (573) 751-7852, send me an email at wes.shoemyer@senate.mo.gov, or drop a line to Room 434, State Capitol, 201 West Capitol Ave., Jefferson City, MO 65101.