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Unified Network: Accessing Our Future - An Op-Ed by Governor Mead

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
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Unified Network: Accessing Our Future By Governor Matt Mead

This year Wyoming has seen significant expansion of the infrastructure that brings high-speed internet into our communities and our schools. The impact on education is noteworthy - this year alone there has been a 700% increase in the bandwidth for our students. By the end of the school year, we will have this level of high-speed connection in all of our 48 school districts. That means the infrastructure will be in every county and every community in Wyoming.

This is quite an achievement and the reason I am excited by the progress is captured in one word – access. Beyond the tech jargon and numbers is the fact that this expansion creates more opportunities for us and for future generations. More broadband gives us the choice to continue to live, learn and work in this wonderful place we call Wyoming and to expand the economy by growing new businesses.

For schools, connecting to the internet and especially to high-speed internet allows our children to have access to great educational resources. Teachers can download instructional material, live-stream events, and collaborate with other classes  anywhere in Wyoming, the U.S., or the world. Such advanced technology provides limitless opportunities – it allows teachers and students to stretch the bounds of their knowledge, skills, and creativity. We have amazing children, gifted teachers and a state that supports education - access through technology to the world of information adds more to that winning equation.

I have seen firsthand, interacting with school children via video and the internet, how high-speed access makes a difference. With high-speed connections, Wyoming students can ask their Governor questions. With high-speed connections, I can visit their classrooms, without the cost of traveling. Teachers can use this same technology to interact with researchers and resource material from around the globe. Access and opportunity go hand in hand. Without high-speed access, opportunity diminishes.

A collateral benefit of bringing this infrastructure upgrade to schools is that it creates more access – that word again – for private companies and individuals. Wyoming’s quality of life, coupled with internet access like people in big cities have, is an unbeatable combination. Entrepreneurs can operate a business on whatever scale they wish from any of our great towns and enjoy all the benefits of living and raising a family in Wyoming. I must also note that upgrading our technology infrastructure builds on our efforts to attract data centers and the good jobs that come with them.

At the core of all this is the push to make Wyoming an even better place than it is now for present and future generations. Our state has long sought economic opportunities that will keep our children from moving away. With 21st century advances in technology, we have additional things to look to - high-speed internet access and resulting new and emerging jobs. The leading industries in Wyoming - energy, tourism and agriculture – form a strong base and provide many employment options, but if we can grow the technology sector we create another choice for our kids. They can launch a business online on their own or work remotely for a large international company. It’s all about access.

While we saw great progress this year, there is more to do. The expansion of infrastructure has increased speeds and download capabilities, but every school still connects to the internet through Cheyenne. That means that, if a class in Cody wants to have a video conversation with a class in Powell, the connection has to go all the way down to the Capitol City and back. It is more efficient and more reliable to have what is known as a unified network. This takes Cheyenne out of the loop and allows Cody to communicate directly with Powell.

Wyoming companies are ready to go to work to build this unified network and provide access to the next generation of internet connections. If there is revenue to support the construction of a unified network, I will support it. As has often been said, access to the internet is a great benefit for a rural state like Wyoming; it enhances tele-education, tele-medicine and tele-commuting. A unified network is a tool that provides the bridge to a brighter future.

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