

Call for Free Internet for all South Carolinians

Whereas: The Federal government is requiring a switch to digital broadcasting that creates “excess capacity” for Educational Broadcast Service providers.

Whereas: SC is the only state where all Educational Broadcast licenses are owned by a single state agency, and the infrastructure paid for by taxpayers.

Whereas: SC ETV owns 67 broadcast licenses that cover the state, which must be transitioned to new usages or forfeited.

Whereas: Fewer than half our state’s citizens currently have Internet access and some rural areas have no broadband Internet service. Those without service are disproportionately low income and minority citizens.

Whereas: The State Legislature has created the SC Educational Broadband Service Commission to manage the transition by leasing SC ETV’s broadcast spectrum to private telecommunications companies, or public/private partnerships.

Whereas: Providing a free level of service to all citizens is a sound business practice that would create many new Internet users who would upgrade to a subscription service.

Whereas: South Carolina taxpayers own the only educational broadcast system that covers an entire state, which could provide wireless Internet service statewide at no additional cost to taxpayers.

Whereas: South Carolina’s most pressing problems are education, employment and health care -- and universal access to the Internet could address these critical needs in a profound way - without additional cost to the taxpayers.

Therefore:

Be it resolved: The state of South Carolina shall use this unique opportunity to provide a free, statewide, “lifeline” wireless Internet service.

Be it further resolved that: The State of South Carolina shall devote a percentage of revenue from leasing the EBS system to provide training and tools for citizens to take advantage of the life-enhancing benefits of Internet literacy. This program could start with the 250,000 K-12 students who qualify for the free lunch program.

Organization: _____

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For more information on Free E-SC call 803-808-3384 • email: network@scpronet.com

South Carolina's opportunity to lead the nation...

The rationale and strategy for Free E-SC

Because South Carolina is the only state that owns all the educational broadcasting licenses, we have the unique opportunity to be the first state to provide free wireless Internet to all citizens. The 67 licenses owned by SC ETV -- and the taxpayer-funded infrastructure -- are paid for, so the capability for state-wide, free Internet is in hand.

Universal access to the Internet would be the single most significant thing we could do - at no cost to taxpayers - to improve educational, health care and employment opportunities for all South Carolinians; regardless of income or geographic location. Over 250,000 SC school children qualify for free lunches. Many of them also don't have Internet access, or the skills and tools to take advantage of being on line. Many rural communities don't have Internet access that would improve their educational, health and employment opportunities.

The nationwide switch to digital broadcasting has made much of the broadcasting spectrum "excess capacity" because digital signals take up much less bandwidth than analog. South Carolina must submit plans to the Federal Communications Commission by April 15, 2009, to use the excess capacity of the licenses -- or lose them. The legislature created the Educational Broadband Service Commission to oversee what is referred to as the "educational broadband transition." The state plans to lease the broadcast spectrum to private telecommunications companies, or public/private partnerships and put the estimated \$5 to \$8 million annual revenue in the general fund. The actual and future value of the spectrum is unknown.

While we agree with the public/private partnership leases, we submit that the state's priority concerns may not be reflected in the terms of the leases or the use of the revenue.

We call on the Commission, the Joint Bond Review Committee and the Budget and Control Board to use SC's educational broadcast capabilities to:

- Create a "lifeline broadband service" that would provide a free universal access tier of Internet service for all citizens. This service would be at a level below subscription services and would introduce scores of thousands of new consumers to the Internet. These new users would provide a source of new customers for expanded subscription services.
- Establish a "Citizens Trust" that would use a percentage of the lease revenue to provide tools and training for citizens to access the Internet.

South Carolina, through its already established Educational Broadcast capability, has the unique opportunity to lead the nation in closing the "digital divide." The state of Tennessee recently contracted with AT&T for a \$600 million upgrade of its broadband network for schools and governments. The investment South Carolina started making in the 1970's puts our state ahead of Tennessee and other states that are now making major expenditures in educational broadband services. We need to wisely leverage our investment to the benefit of our citizens and our future.

South Carolina can create a new paradigm for a public/private partnership around the leveraging of its EBS spectrum. This could usher in a new relationship with the private sector that returns money to the state's coffers and fosters a smarter and better educated citizenry that can compete in a global and increasingly digital world.