

## **SC's opportunity to lead the nation...** The rationale and strategy for a Universal Internet Service

South Carolina is facing a deadline to present a plan to the Federal Communication Commission for the use of the state's educational broadcasting capability that will be "excess capacity" due to the switch to digital broadcasting.

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 its citizens. The 67 licenses owned by SC ETV -- and the taxpayer-funded infrastructure -- are paid for, so the capability for statewide, 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. Most of them 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 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 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 "universal 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 to the lease holders
- Establish a "Citizens Trust" that would use a percentage of the lease revenue to provide tools and training for citizens to access the Internet. Start with a scholarship application program for the quarter of a million children who can't afford lunch, administered by the local school districts.

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 1960'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.

For more information and an action guide to universal access, contact the Progressive Network  
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# Call for Universal 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 the state, 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, 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 a scholarship program for the 250,000 K-12 students who qualify for the free lunch program.

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