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When bells ring at the end of the day in schools across rural Georgia, the local fast-food joints know what to expect. Gobs of students descend on the McDonald's, Burger Kings and Wendy's in small towns across the state. But it's not a Big Mac, Whopper or Frosty many of the kids are after. It's Wi-Fi.

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Sixteen percent of Georgians do not have high-speed internet access, and the vast majority of those broadband deserts are in rural counties. While all public schools in Georgia have broadband internet, many students don't. And in an age when web access is required for homework and other assignments, students go where they can to get online.

And that's a problem, Tifton Mayor Julie Smith told a panel of **state leaders researching the needs of rural Georgia**. Broadband access is a "challenge," she said. "The availability of that is so important, especially for schoolchildren," Smith told the House Rural Development Council at a recent meeting in her South Georgia town. "If they cannot get their homework done when they're home ... they can't learn. If they can't learn, they can't go to secondary education. If they can't get to secondary education, we don't have a trained workforce."

It's not just students. Small businesses, the backbone of most rural communities, increasingly rely on the internet for ordering, sales, payroll and more. In tiny Bluffton, in southwest Georgia, Jean Turn is the comptroller for White Oak Pastures, a world-renowned farm famous for its grass-fed beef and pastured poultry. The farm is easily the town's largest employer and has a burgeoning online market. But doing business online is not always easy, Turn said. "Broadband is always an important thing," she said. "We have 10 megs! We're top-of-the-line, top-of-the-list!"

In Albany, John Hansen is one of the lucky ones. His internet provider, Mediacom, **recently launched 1-gigabit** (1,000 megabits) service in 52 rural communities, including Albany. Hansen is an IT professional, and the new higher speeds available to him allow him to respond to client emergencies from home. "I can hook up to my computer at work (from home), I can remote into whatever server is down, without slowing down, without seeing a difference in performance," Hansen said. He also has a 19-year-old daughter at home who is in college. She can do research and take online classes without bogging down Hansen's system, he said.

There's a human experience element to the problem, too. The internet provides the world at one's fingertips, an endless opportunity of art, knowledge, language, culture and diversity. A recent study by the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute asked rural Georgians to share information about internet access at their home or business.

Out of more than 11,000 responses, only 29 percent said their internet speeds were sufficient, while 79 percent said access to broadband was very important to their quality of life. More than 60 percent said it was very important to their ability to earn a living. It is not a problem unique to Georgia. A recent Pew

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Research Center study found 73 percent of Americans have broadband access at home. For rural Americans, however, that number drops to 63 percent. "Broadband" can mean many things, although the Federal Communications Commission defines it as internet access with speeds of 25 megabits per second.

The numbers are moving in the right direction, though. Ten years ago, only 35 percent of rural Americans had high-speed internet at home compared with just more than half of all Americans. In Georgia, too, access is improving. Georgia ranks 19th overall in broadband access and 14th for rural access, according to a state House of Representatives study.

Telecommunications companies are investing heavily to bring big-city speeds to rural areas. Beyond Mediacom, Stephen Loftin, the executive director of the Georgia Cable Association, told lawmakers last month that the cable industry alone has invested \$3 billion over the past decade and now serves 1.6 million people.

Cox Communications has offered discounted internet service to low-income families since 1999. Cox's Connect2Compete program offers low-cost internet to k-12 families enrolled in the free or reduced lunch program in schools in 18 states, including Georgia. It was expanded last year to include any U.S. Housing and Urban Development-assisted family with children in communities it covers, which includes a number of small towns in Middle Georgia. Cox Communications and The Atlanta Journal-Constitution are both units of Sandy Springs-based Cox Enterprises.

The challenges are immense. High-speed internet typically requires new wires to be hung on power poles with lines running from the poles to an individual home or business. That's expensive, and more so in rural communities where local electric co-ops or municipal electric utilities charge companies three times what Georgia Power charges to use their poles.

Right-of-way access "has always been guaranteed for telephone companies," AT&T lobbyist Kevin Curtin said. "But when you start deploying broadband, and not voice service, the laws have not kept up with technology. Last time they were edited, the statute still said telegraph service." It can cost up to \$5,000 per mile per year in fees in Georgia to hang broadband wires, while 35 states have eliminated right-of-way access fees.

Then, there are taxes. While 23 states have eliminated sales taxes on broadband deployment, Georgia isn't among them. Sales taxes on telecommunications equipment generates about \$33 million a year here. "That makes a big difference," Loftin said. "If South Carolina and North Carolina don't tax network equipment but Georgia does, that's another 5, 6, 7 percent depending on the county that gets added to the cost of that service."

And while Georgia ranks fairly high in terms of access to broadband, it does worse when it comes to signing up for it. AT&T's Curtin said while the state is 19th overall in broadband access, it ranks 28th in the number of people getting the service. Curtin said AT&T invested \$5.5 billion on wired and wireless networks in Georgia from 2013 to 2015. Loftin said it's hard to get a return on investment if a company has to string wire past 10 homes to get to one customer. "If you had an 80 percent adoption rate, you could serve a much broader area," he said.

The future, then, is likely not to be in wires running from poles to homes and businesses, industry experts agreed. It's in wireless technology. Curtin said AT&T will begin an experiment this year for its Project AirGig, which envisions superfast internet hubs atop power poles that beam gigabit speeds into nearby homes. "If this technology pans out the way we hope," he said, "it will be a huge opportunity and game change for rural Georgia." — *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

Fox is turning up the heat in a fight with its TV station affiliates over how to bring its programming to streaming-media consumers.

The network has quietly started offering a national, 24-hour feed on Hulu's live-streaming TV service in more than 70 markets where it hasn't come to agreements on streaming with local affiliate stations, including Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Birmingham, Ala.

Traditionally, the major broadcast networks—Fox, ABC, NBC and CBS—have made their entertainment and national news programming available through local stations, which fill out the rest of the schedule with local news and daytime fare. So Fox's move represents a drastic shift in approach, cutting out station owners and groups that own Fox affiliate stations in many markets, including Raycom Media Inc. and Sinclair Broadcast Group Inc.

The national Fox feed is only live on Hulu, which is partly owned by 21st Century Fox, but people close to Fox said the network intends to launch it on other streaming outlets offering lineups of channels

similar to cable TV offerings, such as AT&T 's DirecTV Now and Sony Corp.'s PlayStation Vue. Wall Street Journal parent News Corp and 21st Century Fox share common ownership.

In the place of local news and daytime programming, Fox has plugged into the stream some programming from sister cable channels like National Geographic, Fox Business Network and Fox News, as well as library programming from 21st Century Fox Television studio. Among the shows from National Geographic that are filling in the gaps: "Diggers," about people digging for old American artifacts, and "Building Wild," in which the show's hosts help people build wilderness getaways.

The move has raised the ire of some of Fox's station affiliates. They say Fox has been offering terms far inferior to what rivals NBC, ABC and CBS are offering station owners for participation in streaming services. At issue is how the two sides will divvy up their share of the monthly subscriber fees consumers pay for streaming services like Hulu's. In at least some cases, Fox is offering station owners business terms that are 50% below that of other networks, people familiar with the matter said. "Fox has elected not to make the same efforts in the same way the other three networks have," one local station executive said. "You're not providing something of value that reflects what the affiliate brings to the party."

Fox executives are optimistic they will hammer out deals with affiliates. But in the interim, they want new streaming customers in every market to be able to watch live Fox programming. Nexstar Broadcasting Group 's chief operating officer, Brian Jones, who chairs the board of Fox-affiliated stations, said Nexstar is completing a deal with Fox for new streaming services. Mr. Jones said Fox negotiated the right to offer such a feed as it struck its last round of agreements with affiliates, so the move isn't entirely a surprise.

For the broadcast stations, ensuring they get their share of streaming TV fees is hugely important as traditional pay-television subscriptions decline. Companies like Sony PlayStation Vue have found it slow going to strike deals with the hundreds of local affiliates of the major broadcast networks across the country. Even Apple Inc., which has long toyed with getting into the TV business, **struggled with how to overcome** the hurdle of signing up broadcasters across the country efficiently.

While NBC, CBS and ABC negotiated with the boards that represent multiple affiliate groups, Fox opted to hammer out individual deals as local station owners' agreements with the network come up for renewal, in a move that station owners say gives Fox more leverage. Fox has come to terms with some station groups like Tribune Media, which owns 14 affiliate stations in such cities as Seattle, Denver and San Diego. In those markets, Tribune's Fox affiliates will stream their feeds on the Hulu live-TV service, with Fox's network programming included as usual. Tribune Media recently struck a deal to sell itself to Sinclair, which has yet to come to terms with Fox.

Offering its own streaming feed holds risks for Fox. Some broadcast industry executives noted that consumers who think they may be streaming the feed of a local Fox station may be disappointed when their local news programming isn't available. Other executives say it isn't clear whether the network would have the rights to include NFL games on its streaming channel unless it has signed on the local affiliate. A Fox spokesman said all network programming will be in the 24/7 streaming feed. The NFL declined to comment. — *Wall Street Journal*

Kris Hart, a businessman from Montgomery county, is jumping into the race to challenge Governor Tom Wolf next year. Hart will make his official announcement on Thursday in Blue Bell.

"Having listened to their concerns I realize the tough challenges facing our State and I am ready to step forward to propose solutions that reflect common sense approaches to business, government and social issues," Hart said in a release announcing his bid. Hart had been **considering a run for the U.S. Senate**, even forming an exploratory committee.

Hart runs Hart Strategic Enterprises, a company that focuses on investing in inner city businesses like convenience stores and salons. Politically, Hart was the Second Vice-Chairman of the College Republican National Committee. "Joining the race for Governor of Pennsylvania isn't about politics for me. It's as simple as listening to people and as important as doing everything I can to help all people," Hart said.

Hart grew up in Montgomery county, and attended George Washington University in Washington, D.C. He is one of the younger candidates for Governor at 34 years old. Hart joins state Senator Scott Wagner and Allegheny county businessman Paul Mangoin the race. House Speaker Mike Turzai (R-Allegheny) **asked GOP Committee members** in his consideration for a run. Former Lieutenant Governor Jim Cawley is also rumored to be weighing a bid for Governor. — *politicspa.com*



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