

Bringing 21st Century Technology to Rural Texas

When I signed on to this campaign, I committed to running on what I hoped to accomplish in the Texas Legislature, rather than what I was against. I believe we need positive, results-oriented approaches in political campaigns, especially with regard to extending the advantages of 21st century technology to rural Texas. Fearmongering might get some politicians votes, but it won't bring internet service to West Texas.

In the announcement of my candidacy, I outlined the four major issues that drew me into the race: access to healthcare, improvement of our public schools, affordable higher education, and availability of high-speed internet. Our state's failure to provide internet infrastructure exasperates problems in the other three areas. When our public schools, colleges, and even routine health care go online, what do people who don't have internet service do? How can a West Texan run a 21st century business with 20th century technology? How can our economy recover from the current economic distress without modern technology?

From the earliest days of the Republic governments, both state and national, have assumed the responsibility of building infrastructure, beginning with the National Road supported by George Washington and signed into law by Thomas Jefferson. State governments, like New York, funded the canal boom a little later, and the US government used the land grant program to finance the railroad expansion of the 19th century. In the depths of the Great Depression, the Rural Electrification Administration (the REA) brought electricity to the countryside (including to the home and business of my own parents in rural East Texas). In the 1950s, our great interstate highway system was a central accomplishment of the Eisenhower administration. Then in the latter half of the 20th century, the government funded the development of the internet. So we have a long history of governments supporting projects that benefit the public.

In my opinion, the internet is to the 21st century as the railroad was to the 19th and electricity and the interstate highway system were to the 20th: it is vital infrastructure necessary for the success of individuals and the community itself.

The internet is no longer a luxury; it's a necessity, as so powerfully demonstrated by the COVID-19 crisis. For example, in West Texas counties such as Hemphill, Fisher, Wheeler, and Borden fewer than fifty percent of the people have access to broadband internet service. Not only are students unable to access online courses and other resources, but farmers can't

improve their productivity, and business owners can't meet consumer expectations.

So far, our Texas legislature has not acted to address this issue effectively, in spite of the fact that about two million Texans do not have access to broadband. Overall, Texas ranks 38th among the states for internet service, but rural Texans are the worst off. Thirty-one percent of them do not have broadband service. This failure is especially devastating in House District 68.

If Americans in the depths of the Great Depression could commit to extending electricity throughout rural America, surely we can do as much for the next generation of Texans. Recent comparisons of our own times with the 1930s should encourage us to look at some of our forbearers' solutions to economic collapse. When the REA was set up in the 1930s only about three percent of rural Texans had electricity; by the 1950s over ninety percent were plugged in. The REA not only improved quality of life in rural Texas, it also brought new businesses to the countryside, expanded opportunities for old ones, and helped drive the economic expansion that took off after World War II. Surely expanded internet service will be critical to economic recovery in our own times, and rural Texas must not be left out.

As always in Texas, those who object to expanding this infrastructure are likely to raise the issue of costs and taxes. Texas is a large state with huge swaths of unserved and underserved rural areas, so internet connectivity will be expensive. But returns on the investment will more than compensate for the cost, just as the commitment to the REA paid off with a better quality of life and expanded business opportunities. As a result, tax revenues went up too.

Other states have found creative ways to fund this public service, including tax incentives, grants and loans to providers, special dedicated funding programs, cooperatives modeled on the REA, and federal stimulus grants. The legislature should be looking at and evaluating all these options. The only choice that should be off the table is to do nothing.