

Wi-not?

State Wi-Max initiative not expected to meet deadline

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An initiative to expand wireless Internet services statewide may end up one of South Carolina's great missed opportunities.

"Opportunity lost," said John Warner.

"It's not going to happen," State Rep. Dwight Loftis and former Sen. Jim Ritchie have been big proponents of a bill that would use ETV tow-

ers to create a Wi-Max broadband network for the state. When ETV transitions from an analog television signal to digital broadcasting on Feb. 17, it will free up the airwaves for an alternative use.

The South Carolina Educational Broadband Service Commission has to make a decision on what to do with ETV's spectrum by Jan. 21. If no action is taken, the network reverts to the federal government.

"It's not a question of whether the spectrum is going to be used," Warner said, an advocate for the Wi-Max net-

work and organizer of the Greenville-based investor conference InnoVenture. "They (FCC) are going to auction it off and they are going to benefit from the auction, not us."

The plan is to lease the spectrum to a third party provider, whereby the state gets into the wholesale business, not retail. Still, there is a competitive threat - whether real or perceived - to the incumbent telecommunications industry. They could bid for the business or lose out to someone else.

"They didn't have to say no," Warner said of the telecommunications industry. "All they had to do is run out the clock."

The bill was introduced two years ago. Jane Sosebee, director of external affairs for AT&T South Carolina, said she believes it is appropriate for the state to maximize the value of its resources.

"As we have said for many months, if the state decides to lease spectrum to private providers, we recommend it be done on market-based conditions and in a manner that does not favor one provider or technology over any other," she said. "We support public policies that encourage investment and promote competition throughout the industry."

The availability of Wi-Fi access in rural areas is a common question for Phil Yanov, host of a personal technology segment on Clemson University's "Your Day," which airs 12 p.m. to 1 p.m. on the S.C. ETV Radio Network. But only in the past month did he get two callers specifically asking about a statewide network.

"Maybe no one figured out how to make money off of this," he said. "Maybe it is so hopelessly complicated it didn't get our attention."

The dollar value for available spectrum can change rapidly, Warner added. Ten years ago he was invested in Carolina Phone, which sold its spectrum for \$100 million in early 2000. Six months later,

when the technology bubble burst, "it would have been worthless."

On the air, Yanov hasn't raised the issue. But he thinks an opportunity is being missed for the private sector to get involved, but he isn't keen on the government providing Wi-Fi.

Warner said the state could be creative with how it uses a Wi-Max network. It could be used by K-12 students in school and at home or as part of an ever-expanding platform of services for the automotive industry.

"Imagine if you were in an accident in a relatively rural area," Warner said. "EMS is equipped with video technology and images are beamed to a doctor in a hospital who is prescribing care while you are in route to the hospital."

Having wireless Internet is also an economic development tool. Southern Wesleyan University in Central has provided free access to its students for three years.

"When you are in the market for prospective students, it is very competitive," said Ed Welch, the university's assistant director of public relations and Web coordinator. "The possibility of a wireless cloud blanketing the area would have a great complementary impact to our existing network."

Mike Dodd said the statewide Wi-Max plan would make South Carolina's rural counties more competitive.

"By providing access to Wi-Max, businesses in the rural counties would have access to the same technology that urban areas enjoy," said the managing director of Integra Realty Resources in Columbia and Greenville. "It would also enhance the economic development efforts in our larger markets, as we would offer the latest technology."

From a residential perspective, Dodd said it could potentially level the playing field for some school districts.

"School districts heavily influence home values, so it would be interesting to see the effect, especially if access was free to those with school age children," he said. ☐

