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Rural America and the 5G Digital Divide. Telecoms Expanding Their "Toxic Infrastructure"

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While there is considerable telecom hubris regarding the 5G rollout and increasing speculation that the next generation of wireless is not yet ready for Prime Time, the industry continues to make promises to Rural America that it has no intention of fulfilling. Decades-long promises to deliver digital Utopia to rural America by T-Mobile, Verizon and AT&T have never materialized.

Despite much bravado, the biggest telecom carriers have never shown the willingness to fund the necessary infrastructure nor do they possess the necessary infrastructure to bridge the digital divide – despite $22 billion in government subsidies and grants over the last five years specifically to provide wireless coverage to rural America. At the same time, the incompetence at the FCC has been staggering – as an unreliable, albeit compromised, Commission that has consistently failed to provide accurate, reliable maps to identify broadband availability for rural America.

Whether 5G will measure up to its hype of performance and expectations remains a question since there is a different market today than when 4G came on line in 2010. At that time, there was room for improved cell service, more apps, video streaming and new subscribers. Today there is little new subscriber growth except in the chronically underserved areas of rural America which has been neglected by the telecom industry and FCC for decades. The challenge for 5G is to create a market demand, to devise new gimmicks to finagle higher revenues out of current subscribers and most especially to expand their toxic infrastructure to rural America. The market is much more aware than it was in 2010 as customers are no longer lining up around the corner to purchase the newest thingamajig.

As universal wireless coverage remains a myth in rural America, the Digital Divide is alive and well after decades of neglect by those telecoms who now see rural customers as their cash cow.

With the digital world of personal computers and cell phones a reality for the last three decades, broadband service to rural America has continued to play second fiddle in favor of upgrades to more affluent urban customers and the telecom industry's bottom line.

Unlike the national commitment to provide rural electrification in the 1920's as a major accomplishment, there has been no such Federal commitment to bring geographically challenged citizens into the digital age nor has Congress demanded that the telecom industry do whatever it takes to end the Digital Divide.

The fact that rural America was the topic of three previous Commerce committee hearings is indicative of how closing the Digital Divide is considered mandatory for a successful 5G rollout. As the National Security Council power point suggested "*by initially focusing on rural broadband, the network would guarantee a revenue stream while further business models develop*,." In other words, the telecom industry is banking on rural America, in its desperation for wireless service, to subscribe (probably at premium rates) after decades of neglect.

In 2017, the USDA reported that 29% of American farms had no internet access. The FCC says that 14 million rural Americans and 1.2 million Americans living on tribal lands do not have 4G LTE on their phones, and that 30 million rural residents do not have broadband service compared to 2% of urban residents. It's beginning to sound like a Third World country.

Despite an FCC $4.5 billion annual subsidy to carriers to provide broadband service in rural areas, the FCC reports that '*over 24 million Americans do not have access to high-speed internet service, the bulk of them in rural area"*while a Microsoft Study found that "*162 million people across the US do not have internet service at broadband speeds.*"

At the same time, only three cable companies have access to 70% of the market in a sweetheart deal to hike rates as they avoid competition and the FCC looks the other way. The FCC believes that it would cost $40 billion to bring broadband access to 98% of the country with expansion in rural America even more expensive. While the FCC has pledged a $2 billion, ten year plan to identify rural wireless locations, only 4 million rural American businesses and homes will be targeted, a mere drop in the bucket.

Which brings us to rural mapping: Since the advent of the digital age, there have been no accurate maps identifying where broadband service is available in rural America and where it is not available. The FCC has a long history of promulgating unreliable and unverified carrier-provided numbers as the Commission has repeatedly '*bungled efforts to produce accurate broadband maps*" that would have facilitated rural coverage.

During the Senate Commerce Committee hearing on April 10th regarding broadband mapping, critical testimony questioned whether the FCC and/or the telecom industry have either the commitment or the proficiency to provide 5G to rural America. Members of the Committee shared concerns that 5G might put rural America further behind the curve so as to never catch up with the rest of the country. Committee Chair Roger Wicker (R-Miss) opened the hearing with

> "To close the digital divide, we need to have accurate broadband maps that tell us where broadband is available and where it is not available. This is critical because maps are used to inform federal agencies about where to direct broadband support. Flawed and inaccurate maps ultimately waste resources and stifle opportunities for economic development in our rural and underserved communities."

Tim Donovan of the Competitive Carriers Association told the committee that the FCC had falsely claimed in a December report that "*approximately 100% of the American population lives in geographical areas covered by mobile LTE with a minimum 5Mbps speed*"as an example of the Commission peddling false data.

Mike McCormick, President of the Mississippi Farm Bureau with 200,000 family members quoted from the FCC's 2018 report that 72% of Mississippi resident had broadband coverage while data from a comparable Microsoft study found that only 487,000 citizens or 16% had broadband service. Further, the FCC reported that 41% of Jefferson County residents had broadband usage while the Microsoft study found that only 5.6% Jefferson County residents had usage. McCormick told the committee he was '*very confident"*in disputing the FCC figures.

In discussing variable terrain and foliage in rural areas that has delayed installation of necessary cellular infrastructure, McCormick mentioned that "*pine needles are some of the bigger deflectors of broadband signal because they are the exact same size of band width*" as an example of challenges in rural America. Who knew pine needles could be a factor to 5G?

McCormick went on to explain that in February 2018, the FCC released a map showing areas eligible to receive FCC Mobility Fund Phase II funding for deployment of 4G LTE service which provides $4.53 billion over ten years for telecom carriers to bring mobile and broadband service to rural and underserved areas. The Mississippi map showed that 98% of the state was already receiving mobile broadband service which the Farm Bureau disputed, ultimately filing a waiver request with the FCC to challenge the map's accuracy.

The short of the story is that while the Farm Bureau collaborated with the Mississippi Public Service Commission (PSC) to fulfill FCC requirements, the final conclusion was that not one of their speed tests processed through the PSC program was approved by the FCC for challenge. In other words, no 'average' member of the public would have been able to successfully challenge the integrity of the FCC maps.

Chair Wicker (R-Miss) responded

> "Here's where you were not a failure Mr. McCormick…we determined that the challenge process is unworkable and frankly worthless. The map is inaccurate and almost impossible using that challenge process to demonstrate this. It needs to be fixed and no program should go forward unless we are satisfied in the Congress that the process is going to touch areas that need it."

There was unanimous agreement among Members of the Committee and the witness panel that "*the maps are fake news and not reliable*." Sen. Roy Blount (R-Missouri) who reported that 51% of rural Missouri is without broadband coverage, inquired "*Does anyone believe that the maps are worth relying on*?" No one responded affirmatively.

Jonathan Spalter of the US Telecom Association informed the Committee that the '*our 5G future will be built and based on our ability to pull the fiber ubiquitously, extensively and quickly*" and further dropped a bomb on the Committee that the "*final last mile of any 5G wireless network is built and based on the fiber based backhaul opportunities that exists through the wireline businesses..upon which 5G wireless networks ultimately rely."*

Chair Wicker used the analogy that when electricity came to rural Mississippi,

> "we ran the power out to the end of the dirt road. Are you saying that, as a general rule, we are going to have to, big time, run fiber out to the end of the dirt road? Sen. Blount has touched on a very, very important subject that we'll

> need a lot more discussion about."

Spalter confirmed Wicker's understanding. Clearly, the concern about providing 5G to rural America had just hit a seemingly insurmountable roadblock that given the diversity of rural terrain obstacles, laying fiber cables would be mandatory as Spalter had described.

NTSA

Previously, both T-Mobile and Sprint promised, if allowed to merge,5G networks to 85% of rural areas in three years, and 90% of rural areas in six years but that was before the issue of how installing miles and miles of fiber optics might affect that promise. Shirley Bloomfield, CEO of NTSA, the rural broadband association representing 850 rural telecom companies, responded that the T-Mobile/Sprint promise

> "would require huge amounts of fiber backhaul that neither company currently possesses, as small cells must be placed very close to the customer (often within 300 to 500 feet) to reach the higher speeds contemplated by 5G making the technology particularly impractical (and very expensive) for most rural applications anytime soon."

In October, 2018, NTSA opposed the merger citing T-Mobile as the owner of '*valuable spectrum for many years*' that"*had ample time to build out the rural areas or enter into a joint venture*."In other words, the telecom industry is already well aware of the necessity to "*pull wire*" in order to install 5G infrastructure throughout rural America.

The question for the telecom industry is that if the economics of 4G did not dramatically increase subscribers in rural America, how will the very expensive and much more controversial 5G provide a sufficient customer base to guarantee a return on the telecom industry's $275 billion investment?

To be continued….

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