

Internet Connectivity, Infrastructure Focus of Arkansas Economic Issues Breakfast Series
By Mark Carter - 3/17/2010 11:36:07 AM

In just five years, broadband Internet connectivity has evolved from a luxury to a necessity, according to Michelle Stockman, vice president of Connect Arkansas.

Speaking Wednesday to the Arkansas Economic Issues Breakfast Series from Acxiom's River Market headquarters and linked via video conference to seven locations across the state, Stockman said access to the Internet is becoming increasingly ingrained into everyday life.

"A lot of basic services are going to the Internet," she said. "A change of address from the post office has to be completed online now."

Wednesday's installment focused on infrastructure and was the second in the Arkansas Economic Issues Breakfast Series. About 100 people, including several state legislators and members of Arkansas Congressional staffs, were in attendance in Little Rock.

Stockman, who also serves as Broadband Entrepreneurship Program Director at Arkansas Capital Corporation, noted that Arkansas' population of roughly 2.8 million includes more than 1 million who report having no access to the Internet. She said about two-thirds of Americans have broadband Internet access.

In this area, "we're being left behind by other countries," she said. "This lack of access for everyone is stunting our growth. Our broadband speeds are not what they need to be for us to be moving forward with innovation."

Connect Arkansas, an affiliate of Arkansas Capital Corporation, is a private, nonprofit organization created to help link all Arkansans to the Internet.

Stockman noted that 51 percent of Arkansans reported having no broadband service in a recent survey, and another 64 percent cited the expense associated with broadband service as prohibitive. Thirty percent said they wouldn't subscribe to broadband service even if it were affordable and available.

Connect Arkansas is engaged in a project to provide a more detailed map of the state's broadband availability and make high-speed Internet more accessible. Stockman said Arkansas currently has an 80 percent coverage rate for broadband availability.

Roads and Bridges

Jim McKenzie, director of Metroplan and a member of the state's Blue Ribbon Committee on Highway Finance, took the focus from information superhighway infrastructure to physical infrastructure. He said the state has more than 100,000 miles of public roads, more than 16,000 in the state highway

system. That ranks Arkansas' state highway system as the 12th largest in the country.

Arkansas' county road system, McKenzie noted, is the 10th largest in the nation.

The state's aging physical infrastructure must be addressed, he said. He cited as an example the Broadway bridge connecting downtown Little Rock to the north side of the river. Built in the 1920s, the bridge is scheduled to be replaced in 2013. The I-30 bridge over the Arkansas River will need to be replaced before long as well, he noted.

"These roadways are the public's capital assets," he said. "We have a stewardship, a responsibility, to pass them on in better condition than we received them. Our current method of financing roadways will not allow us to do that."

Meanwhile, University of Arkansas economist Kathy Deck said she expects to see positive economic output nationally over the next six quarters, but that consumer sentiment has not yet fully recovered. Michael Pakko, economist with UALR, said Arkansas' economy mirrors the national environment in showing signs of growth.

"But employment growth is lagging, so it doesn't feel like we're in a period of economic recovery yet," he said. "Arkansas, though, continues to do better than the nation as a whole."

Pakko noted that home sales are on their way to recovery after hitting the trough in the fourth quarter of 2008, and that [he expects Arkansas' current stable unemployment rate of 7.6 percent to dip](#).

"We'll take longer to dig our way out of the employment hole," he said. "But we're on our way to recovery. It's just taking longer to get there."

The Arkansas Economic Issues Breakfast Series was sponsored by Arkansas Business and coordinated by the Institute for Economic Advancement at UALR, in cooperation with the Walton Business College at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, the College of Business at the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith, the Delta Center for Economic Development at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, the Economic Research & Development Center at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, the University of Arkansas at Monticello and Southern Arkansas University in Magnolia.