

Expanded broadband council begins internet speed survey

by Rusty Marks
STAFF WRITER

CHARLESTON — West Virginians concerned that they aren't getting the internet download speeds advertised by their service providers can now take a test to find out.

An internet speed survey is now underway, thanks to a state law expanding the powers of the West Virginia Broadband Enhancement Council. Consumers can find the speed test online at <https://broadband.wv.gov>.

"In order to diversify the Mountain State's economy, affordable and accessible broadband service must be available to all West Virginians," said state Commerce Secretary Woody Thrasher. "This is a crucial next step that will allow for continued economic growth and advancement in rural areas of the Mountain State."

"This speed test is safe and secure and available to residents who have internet service at their home, business or at a public facility," said Richard Hinton, chairman of the broadband council. "The more public

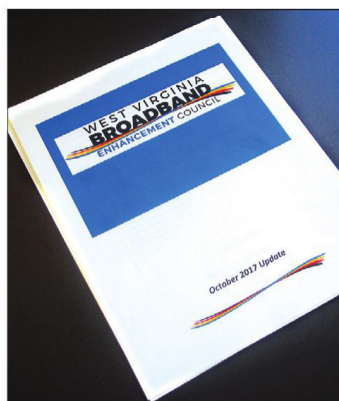
input we receive, the more accurately we can assess the availability of broadband service throughout the state."

"With this information, the broadband council will work with local governments to help bring affordable

broadband service to underserved and unserved areas of the state," Hinton said. "Internet users can access this speed test at the broadband council website and it only takes a few minutes to complete the test."

The speed test is one of the first initiatives undertaken by the broadband council following the passage of House Bill 3093, approved by the Legislature during the 2017 legislative session. Delegate Roger Hanshaw, R-Clay, introduced the legislation as a way to improve broadband internet service in the Mountain State.

According to the broadband council, West Virginia has one of the larg-



Staff photo by Rusty Marks

The West Virginia Broadband Enhancement Council just released a report on its activities since the Legislature increased the council's authority in July.

est percentages of residents without internet access in the whole country. House Bill 3093 expanded the role of the broadband council to study, plan and oversee broadband expansion in the state.

Among Hanshaw's concerns in drafting the legislation was slow download speeds for state residents, who often complained they weren't getting the speeds their internet providers promised. In 2015, Frontier Communications entered into a \$160 million settlement with the office of state Attorney General Patrick Morrisey over complaints from customers who were paying extra money for high-speed internet service they were not getting.

Despite advertising download speeds of up to 6 Mbps, many customers who paid the extra money were experiencing download speeds of 1.4 Mbps or slower, state officials discovered. The settlement included a requirement that Frontier invest \$150 million in internet upgrades to improve download speeds on top of upgrades the company had already planned.

The original version of House Bill 3093 required service providers to tell customers their actual download speeds, instead of maximum or "up to" speeds used in advertising. That



Photo courtesy of Perry Bennett, West Virginia Legislative Services

Del. Roger Hanshaw, R-Clay, pushed for legislation to expand internet service in West Virginia, in part by giving the Broadband Council increased authority to assess, plan and oversee expansion efforts.

part of the bill was removed in the state Senate.

However, the legislation did authorize the broadband council to create accurate internet coverage maps for the state, and to assess broadband performance statewide, including download speeds. The internet speed survey is part of that assessment.

Another key part of House Bill 3093 allows for the creation of internet co-ops to allow small groups of businesses or residents to apply for federal grant funding to create their own local internet networks.

According to an October internet update report presented by the broadband council to the West Virginia Legislature, the broadband council is working on a "Broadband Cooperative Toolkit" to help those trying to set up a Broadband Cooperative Association, or BCA.

"While cooperatives are primarily found in agricultural applications,

it is observed that communities will need professional assistance, including legal, accounting and business services, to form a BCA," the report concludes. "Therefore, the (broadband) council will seek legal services and resources and facilitate training to assist communities in the development of BCAs."

The broadband council is made up of 11 active voting members, including rural and urban residential and business internet users from different parts of the state. Hanshaw; Delegate Kenneth Hicks, D-Wayne; Sen. Craig Blair, R-Berkeley and Sen. Glenn Jeffries, D-Putnam, also sit on the council as non-voting members.

The council holds a regular meeting on the second Thursday of every month.

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Hinton