The New Era of Access
*Expanding Broadband Connectivity
in the Information Age*

Julia Canady **LAW STUDENT,
FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF LAW**

It's 2008 and 90 degrees in Polo, Missouri. With a view like a Grant Wood painting, it's an American Gothic, red barn aesthetic pulled right out of a textbook on the American dream.

One of the clearest memories I have of growing up was from that summer, watching my family gather on the second step of the basement in my great grandparent's house around a single cell phone. We were celebrating the life of my great grandmother–four generations of the family gathered together in Polo, Missouri, just for the weekend.

It was my job to stand in the door of the kitchen and send family members to the right spot on the basement stairs–keeping a steady flow of family on the cell-phone line with my cousin Dusty who was 6,000 miles away, still deployed in Iraq.

What I didn't know then was that we were gathered around that cell phone because we were in the middle of a broadband dead zone– a last mile community that had been untouched by any kind of improvements to reliable broadband connectivity since before I was born. The second step of the basement was the only place near the house that you could have a phone call somewhat untouched by static or call failures, and certainly the only place to dial family in an Iraqi desert thousands of miles away. I came away with just a few snapshot memories of my hazy elementary school summers– but that phone call on a short-horn cattle operation in rural Missouri was one of the clearest.

A lack of access to reliable broadband reveals **pressing connectivity challenges** in rural America and in rural Florida that are more significant than just a dropped phone call.

Broadband connectivity is a policy issue that highlights the gaps. Gaps not only between rural and urban Florida, but between Floridians with full access to the economic and social opportunities the state provides, and those without that access.

Florida, Past and Present

There is, and always has been, a unique allure to Florida. Calling people with an outlaw, land of milk and honey energy, the State of Florida has a legacy of being our nation's open door to opportunity.

In the mid-19th century, my dad's side of the family drifted down to central Florida– chasing a mangroves-turned-Miami-Beach, boom town opportunity as captured by Patrick Smith in *A Land Remembered*. They became part of a state that was in the middle of a categorical shift–residents of a sleepy central Florida citrus town caught in a rapidly evolving blur of economic activity that laid the foundation for the growth our state is experiencing today.

Fast forward to 2021, and our booming economy, quality of life, and general prosperity bring nearly one thousand people to Florida every day–a far cry from the steady drip of migration that my family experienced in the 1850's.

The boom of the 20th century looks a lot like the boom we're experiencing now.

Florida was transformed from an outlaw territory, full of cracker cattle and miles of unfenced range, to one of the leading international economies, in large part because of an explosion of access and connectivity. Henry Flagler's Seven Mile Bridge through the Keys, the CSX network of rail lines, the ports in Punta Rosa, Boca Grande, and Miami, and the opening of the state highway system, changed the paradigm for Floridians and opened our state to the world.

There's a serious parallel to be drawn

between Old Florida and the Florida of 2021, and it centers on expanding access. For the Florida of 1850, it was railroads, ports, and clear roads, but for the Florida of today, it's the internet.

The state of the state

On a national scale, Florida isn't doing badly. Ranking 5th in state broadband access, with an average state-wide upload speed of nearly 127.5 MBPS, our state is performing markedly better than most, and that's good news for Floridians across the state.

But that isn't the whole story. Florida has somewhere around 800,000 citizens who lack access to adequate broadband speeds (that's a minimum download speed of 25 MBPS) That number is equivalent to the entire population count of our 33 rural counties, and is a big gap to bridge. About four-in-ten adults with lower incomes do not have home broadband services (43 percent) or a desktop or laptop computer (41 percent).

In the information age, when access is currency, a lack of broadband access is a problem not just for the people that lack connectivity, but for everyone that cares about our state being a place where everyone can engage in the global economy. In the same way that an early investment in the expansion of highways and deep-water ports led to the long-term economic success of the state, a thoughtful expansion of broadband infrastructure is an essential next step to equip Floridians for the full weight of the 21st century.

It's important, and it deserves our focused attention–so how do we make it happen?

When you drill down into the data, a few things stand out: first, we just don't have good data. Here's a riddle for you: Who actually wants broadband? Even if you make it free, will consumers adopt? How fast does it actually need to be? Where should we put it? Now try to answer those questions without solid data, I dare you.

The very first step towards connecting the unconnected is to not only gather data, but to gather excellent data.

Walking the road to really understanding the demand for broadband is complicated. In 2019, Pew Research published a national study that found that only 54 percent of US households making less than $30,000 per year had broadband. In contrast, 97 percent of US households making more than $100,000 had broadband. Given that about 32 million households make less than $30,000 per year, this means that there are nearly 17 million households that do not have broadband, and that adoption seems to correlate with income.

But why? If an increase in adoption correlates with an increase in income, wouldn't it also correlate with a reduction in price? A 2020 study by the Technology Policy Institute showed that a reduction in price doesn't incentivize adoption, and that we may be a long way off from understanding what does.

We know how critically important it is to have reliable data, and that without it we can't begin to address the challenges facing the state. The data gathering we engage in has to have both the means and the ends

to ask the right kind of questions in order for us to understand, and fill, our state's complex broadband needs.

One of the positive points of data that we do have is that, in large part, we know what works– or rather, who has been able to make it work.

Broadband is an incredibly complex, consumer-centered need. Understanding build-out requires an agility to respond to changing market variables and a serious technical understanding of the telecommunications space. These are needs best addressed by the market through the means of private industry, not the government.

A University of Pennsylvania study of municipal fiber projects found that when the government does attempt to enter the broadband space, their projects lose an average of about $1 million on a net present value basis. The most serious underperformers included Marietta, Georgia (lost $24 million); Provo, Utah (incurred $39 million in debt and sold its system for $1); Dunnellon, Florida (took on $7.4 million in debt and sold its system for $1 million); and Bristol, Virginia (sold its system for $50 million after using $77.2 million in government subsidies and $79.6 million in bond funding). This type of broadband expansion has also been shown to have a statistically insignificant impact on both the local economic prosperity and broadband subscription rates.

Local municipalities tend to not do a great job; private industry seems to be better equipped, so we should just get out of the way and it'll be smooth sailing. Easy, right? ...wrong.

Addressing the barriers

The fact of the matter is that broadband expansion is significantly challenged by the regulatory web. Broadband expansion is urgent, and anything outside of prudent delay is a barrier to the economic success of the state.

Regulatory shot clocks could be a sensible policy solution to help curb the opportunity cost associated with lengthy regulatory timelines. It's a don't-stand-in-your-own-way approach that could give Florida an edge in the broadband space.

We can't move forward without **creating a more sensible regulatory timeline** that draws telecommunications providers into last mile communities and removes the opportunity cost associated with overly burdensome red tape. Successful public private partnerships can't happen without it, and our current regulatory timeline doesn't fit into the rest of Florida's business friendly landscape. Let's fix that.

As we future-cast for Florida's coming decades of expansion, it's more important than ever to take a critical eye to how we can substantively expand economic opportunity across the state.

The internet is inextricably one of the most important factors in doing this. It's the thread connecting today's society and economy, and a tool that should be accessible to every Floridian so that they can be a part of Florida's bright future.

Florida is on the radar of Americans across the country as an oasis of good old-fashioned freedom, opportunity, and home of the new American dream–and it's setting the pulse nationally. Our response should be to work to continue to expand the things that make Florida extraordinary, and that includes taking a look at what paved the road to where we are today: access, connectivity, and an open door to opportunity.