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Ricketts Inspects Creighton's Fast Track To High-Speed Internet

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Monday's roundtable at Creighton, Nebraska, included (from left) Todd Foje, CEO of Great Plains Communications; Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts and District 40 State Sen. Tim Gragert of Creighton.

Randy Dockendorf/P&D

CREIGHTON, Neb. — As the Avera Creighton Hospital CEO, Todd Consbruck knows the importance of dependable high-speed internet during critical situations.

That reliance intensified during the pandemic, when telehealth visits surged in place of face-to-face patients. The rise in virtual visits came on top of large volumes of medical information that were already transferred between sites.

"You can't get halfway through sending an MRI and have the line go down, whether you're sending the information to Yankton, Norfolk, Sioux Falls or Omaha," he told the Press & Dakotan.

The impact wasn't limited to medical data. More people worked from home, students received virtual lessons and people relied on the internet and social media for their connections.

Now, the capacity to handle all that data is changing rapidly — literally — for Creighton.

On Monday, Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts visited the Knox County community of 1,300 residents to see the local impact of receiving broadband service. The town received \$1.7 million in federal funds for the upgrade through 2020 CARES Act, part of the pandemic funding package.

The governor acknowledged the pandemic revealed how much Nebraska, particularly its rural areas, needed reliable high-speed service.

"I think the pandemic really highlighted how difficult it was to work or study from home if you're on the wrong side of the digital divide," he said, referring to the gulf between areas with high-speed broadband and other sites with slow or no internet service.

Great Plains Communications was awarded \$8.9 million of CARES Act funds to bring Fiber to the Home (FTTH) delivered internet to unserved and underserved residents. The funding came through the Remote Access Rural Broadband Grant program to bring high-speed internet connectivity to seven rural Nebraska communities.

GPC was awarded \$1,707,081 for Creighton to connect 748 housing units. GPC technicians Derek Tyler and Andy Jueden have been working with the local connection effort.

"We're still in the construction process, but by the end of July we're hoping to have everything hooked up," Tyler said.

Ricketts, along with legislative and business leaders, toured the local GPC facilities. Afterwards, they discussed the progress and potential of gigabit per speed (Gbps) broadband internet projects. Those 2020 CARES Act funds for those upgrades were administered by the State of Nebraska Department of Economic Development (DED).

Ricketts said he was impressed to see the project come to fruition in Creighton.

"It's great to see how Great Plains is going to put those dollars to work to connect nearly 1,000 (households) in Creighton with broadband access," he told the Press & Dakotan.

"That's critically important when you're talking about working from home, education from home, telehealth and even thing like entertainment with Netflix, e-commerce and things like that."

Construction began last September. Once complete, download speeds of up to 1 Gbps (gigabit per second) will be available to homes and businesses in the community.

This level of speed will allow residents and business owners to operate multiple devices simultaneously without lag or interruption, according to a GPC news release. As a result, those consumers can work and learn remotely. They can stream content with the highest level of speed and reliability.

Great Plains Communications applied for the broadband funding and met the criteria, Ricketts said. The provider already possessed infrastructure that helped get broadband to more households, he added.

"One of the things we're thinking about is how we get people to stay or move to these communities where people are looking for broadband and health care," the governor said.

"(Those two areas) go together as it gets more and more difficult to get (medical) specialists into the small towns. But with broadband, it's more easily achieved with telehealth."

Consbruck echoed those sentiments, noting many specialists suspended visits to satellite clinics in rural communities during the pandemic. Those specialists used telehealth for virtual visits and to prescribe medication.

Consbruck expects the trend will continue after the pandemic ends. Both doctors and patients have found the convenience of using telemedicine, particularly for routine visits.

"It won't replace the annual physical, but we're able to do other things," he said.

In addition, a strong broadband presence helps rural communities attract doctors and other professionals, Consbruck said. The high-speed internet opens up more options for the entire family, he said.

"With recruiting, you want to get someone whose spouse can remotely work and stay in Creighton," he said. "It's not a one-way direction. It helps everyone in Creighton."

Creighton banker Russ Diedrichsen saw the impact of having — and in other cases, not having — high-speed internet.

During the pandemic, bank staff with reliable internet could work from home. Those without it were considered lost productivity, he said. Broadband will not only benefit the employees but also customers, he added.

City Administrator Lindsay Nelson sees the high-speed broadband as beneficial for promoting current businesses and attracting new ones. Great Plains reached out the city council for support in applying for the CARES Act funding.

"They have been great to work with," she said. "We make a pretty good team."

The pandemic provided a major reason for pursuing the broadband and funding, Nelson said. She sees it as important for economic development, citing a recent example in Creighton.

"Somebody was using their debit card, and the process was taking some time," she said. "The customer said, 'When we get broadband, this will be so much easier!' This change will be important to local businesses."

Ricketts' visit shone a spotlight on rural needs and the importance of broadband, Nelson said.

"The governor was able to see how we're spending the (CARES Act) money and how it affects small towns and our everyday lives," she said.

"It's huge for him to see what's happening in our rural areas and what we have, what we don't have, what our needs are and why."

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