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Leave It To Business, Not Government

by

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In the midst of the health-care debate, most Americans probably did not notice that the Federal Communications Commission issued a 300-page National Broadband Plan. We should take note because the cost is estimated to be over \$25 billion.

It is hailed as one of the most rigorous and transparent processes ever undertaken by the agency, and the FCC should be commended for its effort. The very nature of the public participation was primarily due to dazzling technologies already available to most Americans. From the 23,000 online comments to blogs, Twitter and Facebook, the FCC succeeded in meeting one important goal: increased civic engagement.

Many of the other goals are laudable. Who could disagree with a "21st-century roadmap to spur economic growth and investment, create jobs, educate children, protect our citizens and engage in our democracy"? Check out the device for consumers to measure their connection speed (www.broadband.gov). I applaud the chapter regarding integrating digital literacy into classrooms, ensuring that our children are taught not merely keyboarding but keys for safety in cyberspace. Even though beyond the FCC's jurisdiction, hopefully all educators will embrace digital literacy curriculum.

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The ambitious, far-reaching plan defines the problem as 100 million Americans who do not have high-speed broadband at home. However, subtracting children, those who don't want it and households with some access, according to Commissioner Meredith Attwell Baker, that leaves 7 million "unreached." Some consumers just choose not to use their tight budget to buy broadband. Others find access to e-mail and Web sites through DSL — at about \$10 a month — sufficient. Ninety-nine million Americans connect only through mobile devices, the entry point for huge numbers of minority and youth. Others utilize the local library or drop into more than 100,000 free hotspots. In fact, 95 percent of Americans already have broadband access. Just like health care, government cannot and should not force consumers into a specific service, speed or marketplace.

Many states, like Tennessee, have created public-private partnerships to make broadband affordable and available to all who want it. Four states just received more than \$100 million in broadband grants. Upgrades to satellite and new wi-max services are being rolled out to rural and remote areas. Nonprofits such as One Economy and Broadband for America are working on adoption. In addition, Congress appropriated \$7.2 billion in stimulus funds — tax dollars — for broadband that have not been fully implemented. We all want world-class education, health care and jobs. But in these challenging economic times, Commissioner Baker said it best: "The government does not have unlimited resources to support even the most worthwhile efforts."

I heartily agree with FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski's remarks that "government has a crucial, but restrained, role" and that private investment and competition "play a vital role" in broadband expansion. Government could never have envisioned that TV would be watched on mobile phones, much less that our health-care could be monitored from hundreds of miles away. All of this became reality due to "light touch" policies that allowed technology, business models, private investment and, in the end, consumers to pick winners — and sometimes losers — not the government.

* Deborah Taylor Tate is a Distinguished Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Free State Foundation and is a former commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission. The Free State Foundation is a nonpartisan Section 501(c)(3) free market-oriented think tank in Rockville, Maryland. Reprinted with permission of *The Tennessean*.