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EDITORIAL: Rural broadband short-circuited

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Posted: Wednesday, March 12, 2014 6:03 am

Tough luck, far southwestern McLeod County. Better luck next time, Renville and Sibley counties.

While nations such as Bulgaria, Latvia and Romania enjoy lightning-speed Internet, you folks far from the bright lights of the Twin Cities — and eastern Europe, for that matter — will remain second-class citizens of the digital age.

And don't expect the situation to soon improve. On Thursday, major portions of Greater Minnesota suffered a setback when Gov. Mark Dayton declined to reserve part of the state's \$1.2 billion budget surplus to help bring high-speed Internet to all corners of the state.

Rural residents from both sides of the political aisle were hoping the governor would use \$100 million from the surplus to invest in broadband improvements. In a global economy, high-speed Internet is as basic to businesses and homes as electricity and indoor plumbing.

By not pursuing the upgrade yet asking for a repeal of the state's farm equipment repair sales tax, Gov. Dayton is giving mixed messages to those who live outside the metro area. His budget plan acknowledges that

Worldwide Web or what, where and when?

Without high-speed Internet service, www means nothing more than three letters on the side of a building in many rural areas of Minnesota.

agriculture is the economic backbone of the many Minnesota counties and communities. Yet it fails to recognize that agriculture needs the same tools demanded by other industries. That includes broadband.

In announcing his supplemental budget proposal, Gov. Dayton said Minnesota's economy has added 133,000 new jobs during the past three years. "Our improving economy has greatly improved the state's budget forecast — giving us the opportunity to put more money in the pockets of Minnesota families and businesses," he noted.

But even with that extra pocket money, many Minnesota families and business can't obtain terrestrial broadband — because it's not offered in their area.

That can be a deal breaker for rural businesses looking to grow. The governor's own Broad Band Task Force concluded in 2013 that jobs in Greater Minnesota will require the use of state funds to leverage private investments to give a much-needed boost to broadband expansion. The task force recommended \$100 million in public money to kick start a private investment of between \$900 million and \$3.2 billion.

Its report shows just how deep the digital divide goes. In Ramsey and Hennepin counties in the Twin Cities metro area, terrestrial, nonmobile broadband is available to 99 percent of households. McLeod County fares quite well, too, with 98 percent of households served.

But cross into Renville and Sibley counties, and the rates drop to 58 and 51 percent, respectively. Travel farther to Chippewa, Yellow Medicine, Lyon, Murray and Nobles counties, and those rates drop to single digits.

Glencoe Mayor Randy Wilson last week pointed out Gov. Dayton's error.

"Greater Minnesota leaders from business, local government, education and the nonprofit community ... all agree that a \$100 million investment this year would go a long way to ensuring Minnesota's competitiveness in the 21st

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century," Mayor Wilson noted.

With the governor wanting a tax bill on his desk by March 14, rural lawmakers won't have enough time to solicit metro support for the cause. That doesn't bode well for rural Minnesota businesses competing in an international marketplace.

If businesses across the state are to compete with their world rivals, Minnesota policymakers must make broadband access a top economic development priority.

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