

Congress OKs greater broadband access

—by John Dunbar

Congress passed legislation in September that will require the government to keep closer tabs on who has access to the Internet and who does not.

Supporters hope the Broadband Data Improvement Act S. 1492 will help policy makers better identify areas of the country that are falling behind when it comes to high-speed Internet access. The bill passed both houses of Congress, with the Senate approving a final version on a voice vote.

The Federal Communications Commission collects data on broadband use, but its methods have been criticized as outdated. The commission voted in March to greatly improve its data collection. Broadband providers will be required to provide subscription numbers by Census tract, speed, and type of technology.

The legislation passed by Congress goes further. It requires the FCC to conduct consumer surveys of broadband use in urban, suburban, and rural areas, as well as in large and small business markets. Survey questions will include ques-

tions about the cost of access and data transmission speeds.

The legislation requires the agency to compile a list of locales that lack broadband service and determine population and income levels in those areas. The bill also requires the Census Bureau to add questions about Internet use on its survey. Residents will be asked whether they have a computer, whether they have Internet access and, if so, whether they have a dial-up or broadband connection.

The legislation also orders the Government Accountability Office to study broadband speeds and costs and to compare the “availability and quality of broadband offerings” in the U.S. to other industrialized nations.

Such an analysis might provide some insight as to why the U.S.—the birthplace of the Internet—lags behind other developed countries in broadband usage. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ranks the U.S. 15th for broadband penetration. ■