

FCC gets going on national broadband plan

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(AP) -- The Federal Communications Commission took the first step Wednesday in developing a comprehensive plan to give all Americans high-speed Internet access.

At a meeting in Washington, the commission put out a request for comments from the public and industry. The FCC will assemble its plan and present it to Congress by next February, as ordered in the economic stimulus package passed this year.

During the Bush administration, Democrats and consumer advocates called on the government to take a more hands-on approach to speed adoption of broadband, pointing to the higher uptake and Internet speeds available in some other countries.

"Despite the widespread recognition that high-speed Internet services are necessary, this is the first time a government agency will take a comprehensive look at the situation and recommend a course of action to remedy our rapidly declining broadband ranking," Gigi Sohn, president of advocacy group Public Knowledge, said Wednesday.

Internet service providers have stressed that freedom from regulation gives them incentive to invest. But they also could gain from government involvement. The stimulus package contained \$7.2 billion in funding for broadband projects, and the development of the plan could mean there is more to come.

"Creating a climate for investment in advanced broadband networks

should be Job One at the FCC," said Susanne Guyer, senior vice president for federal regulatory affairs at Verizon Communications Inc., the country's fourth-largest ISP.

Republican FCC commissioner Robert McDowell agreed that the country can do more to improve access to broadband, but pointed out that the number of broadband lines grew 17 times from 2000 to 2007.

"Let's be sure to recognize what has gone right at least as much as we analyze any shortcomings," he said in a statement.

According to instructions from Congress, the plan should address both the price and availability of broadband. When the Pew Internet and American Life Project asked households in 2007 and 2008 why they hadn't signed for broadband, those two factors ranked second and fourth, respectively. The largest factor, given by more than half, was that they didn't see the point.

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