FCC chair touts broadband as top priority

August 4 2009, By Troy Wolverton

The Federal Communications Commission's top "strategic" priority will be to encourage greater availability and adoption of broadband Internet access, the agency's new chairman, Julius Genachowski, said in a meeting Monday with editors and reporters at the San Jose Mercury News.

The agency is still studying the issue and examining the best ways to implement the new "national broadband plan," he said. But the effort is an attempt to address the situation he inherited, where, thanks to the policies "adopted over the last decade," the United States is falling behind other countries.

"There should have been a national broadband plan years ago," he said. "There wasn't."

Genachowski took office in late June, but already the agency has appeared more activist that it did under his predecessor, Kevin Martin. In June, the FCC started examining the exclusive deals by which phones are tied to particular carriers. Last week, the agency opened an inquiry into why Apple rejected Google Voice, a telephone service application, for its iPhone applications store.

Although issues surrounding mobile telephony and competition in general are among Genachowski's priorities, they may eventually take a second seat to those surrounding broadband adoption.

Although broadband is a "core" infrastructure for the country,

Genachowski suggested that it didn't get enough attention from the previous administration. He noted that some 40 percent of U.S. households don't currently have broadband access. That rate rises to 60 percent among some sectors of the population, such as minorities and low-income or rural residents.

But it's not just that adoption rates aren't as high as they should be. Transmission speeds are too slow, and there may not be enough competition, he said. Meanwhile, he suggested that broadband is too expensive for some consumers and the government hasn't done enough to tout its benefits.

"Where we are today is a consequence of the policies that were adopted for the last decade," he said.

The one area where broadband adoption has been an outright success has been the government's e-rate program, whose goal is to connect all schools and libraries to the Internet, he said. Under that program, schools and libraries are able to get low-cost broadband connections that are subsidized by the federally managed universal service fund.

But while Genachowski touted the e-rate program as a success, he said it was only one potential piece in solving the nation's broadband issues. Genachowski didn't have clear answers about what other steps the agency would take. But the first step, he said repeatedly, was that the agency needed to gather data on them and make the data more accessible both inside and outside the agency.

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