

# FCC offers early peak at national broadband plan

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(AP) -- Expanding the fund that subsidizes telephone service for poor and rural communities and finding more spectrum for wireless broadband services will be key pieces of a federal plan to bring high-speed Internet connections to all Americans.

Those were among the preliminary recommendations that the Federal Communications Commission outlined Wednesday in a report on its national broadband plan. The plan, which was mandated by the stimulus bill, is due in February.

One proposal would use money from the Universal Service Fund to build broadband networks in underserved communities and pay for high-speed Internet connections for those who cannot afford them. The Universal Service Fund, which is supported by a surcharge on phone bills, was established to subsidize phone service.

Another proposal would explore ways to make more wireless spectrum available for mobile broadband services, including the potential reallocation of some spectrum held by television broadcasters and federal agencies.

The FCC is also seeking ways to promote greater use of unlicensed frequencies, such as "white spaces" between TV stations, and development of new technologies that can make more efficient use of spectrum.

Still another proposal would seek ways to create a new market for television set-top boxes that would be able to work with any video TV service and would integrate online content and applications. The FCC wants to ensure that consumers would be able to buy these new boxes at electronics stores, rather than rent them from a cable operator or other video provider.

Blair Levin, the FCC official in charge of developing the broadband plan, said the plan would focus on encouraging competition and leveraging private-sector investments.

Although the agency will not deliver a final set of recommendations to Congress until February, at least one public interest group, Public Knowledge, is already complaining that the plan does not do enough to bring new competition to the broadband market, which is dominated by the nation's big phone and cable companies.

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