

DIGITAL DAMNATION



PANELISTS POINT TO ANOTHER BUMPY
ROAD THAT MICHIGAN NEEDS TO FIX:
BROADBAND INEQUALITY

BY BOB ALLEN

“Either every student in Michigan counts, or none of them count. You can’t leave some out and say you care about kids.”

— **Marianna Ripple**

An instructional technology specialist in the Eastern Upper Peninsula Intermediate School District, Sault Ste. Marie

“I couldn’t complete my homework because I couldn’t find the internet.”

Sounds like the digital era’s version of “The dog ate my homework.” Yet for thousands of Michigan’s children, it’s not an excuse but a reality that even has its own term: “homework gap.”

“A large portion of students that have a lot of internet access at school go home in the evenings with an expectation...that they complete assignments at home,” said Joe Sawasky, president and CEO of Ann Arbor-based Merit Network. “And the sad fact is that a large proportion don’t have standard broadband access.”

“I’d characterize it as a crisis in Michigan.”

Sawasky expanded on the implications May 30th during the Detroit Regional Chamber’s Mackinac Policy Conference, moderating a panel titled “Digital Inclusion: #FixTheDamnInternet for Michigan Students.”

Participating in the discussion were:

- **Joe Sawasky**, Facilitator, president and CEO Merit Network, Inc.

Panelists:

- **Dr. Johannes Bauer**, Quello chair for media and information policy and chairman of the department of media and information at Michigan State University

- **Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist II**

- **Marc Hudson**, founder and CEO of Rocket Fiber

Merit hosted the Mackinac Policy Conference Session as part of the Michigan Moonshot initiative.

What Sawasky called an issue of “digital inclusion and digital equity” is quantifiable: More than 360,000 Michigan homes lack the lowest level of standard broadband internet, affecting an estimated 27% of the K-12 students in the state.

As one student put it during a video shown during the session, “You guys are in the 21st century, and I’m still stuck back in the 20th.”

The hashtag **#Fixthedamninternet** isn’t just a way to piggyback on the attention being paid to crumbling roads. For just as “infrastructure” means roads and bridges, Gilchrist said, it also means broadband—what he called “the most enabling infrastructure we can create and invest in.”

Without that investment, the state will remain a patchwork quilt of haves and have-nots. “We believe the internet is the great equalizer,” Sawasky said. “And right now, it’s unequal.”

Complicating matters is that the solution is not one-size-fits-all. In rural areas, improving internet access means surmounting barriers of climate, distance and population density. Installing infrastructure is difficult and costly.

In urban areas, the problem is affordability—an end-of-the-month question of “Am I putting food on the table, or am I buying an internet subscription?” Hudson said.

The problem is especially acute in Detroit, home of what Hudson called, “one of the largest digital divides of any American city in the country.” He cited one Rocket Fiber study indicating that up to 40 percent of households lack a fixed broadband connection, with many residents depending on access through mobile phones.

“Ask any student who has done homework on a smartphone,” Hudson said. Not

the same experience.

The internet is “the greatest tool to bridge the inequality gap that has ever existed in human history,” said Hudson, whose company is working to wire Detroit with high-speed broadband. “And now we have a very at-risk part of our population that’s being left behind—and that’s kids.”

Gilchrist knows something about those kids. He can recall showing a little girl the internet for the first time while teaching in a Detroit recreation center in 1998. “Her eyes lit up,” he told the Mackinac audience. “That’s an experience every child deserves.”

Not just deserves, but needs, the panelists agreed. For as formidable as the infrastructure challenge is, just as daunting is the problem of digital literacy.

“There’s whole generations of kids that have very, very little access or exposure to the internet,” Hudson said. “It’s really hard to know what’s on the internet if you’ve used it very little.”

Leveling the digital playing field requires more than just raising digital literacy, said Bauer, who is completing research on the homework gap in rural areas. He described the internet as a “general purpose technology,” a requisite to developing a workforce in the new economy. Over the past 20 years, he said, the gap between the best served and least served has widened.

Sawasky noted figures from the Michigan Broadband Roadmap report, released last year by the administration of former Gov. Rick Snyder, that the state ranks 30th in broadband adoption, even though it’s a top 10 state economically and in population.

Just as important as the breadth of broadband is the strength, said Bauer, who pointed to the correlation between faster speeds and innovation.

“The more applications there are, the more network quality we need,” he said. “If the network is not good enough, we will also not see those innovations.”

In addition, if you can deliver online learning through high-quality broadband, Bauer said, “You can create levels of presence that are very similar to what you experience in a real classroom, and it’s that presence that makes a difference in learning.”

Complicating any solution is that “broadband connectivity is a moving target,” Bauer said. In 2011, 3 Mbps was the standard. Today, 25 Mbps. What will the standard be in a few years?

According to the Michigan Broadband Report, the goal three years from now is that every resident and business in the state will have what the Federal Communications Commission defines as minimal access: 3 Mbps minimum upload and 25 Mbps download. And by 2026, the goal is 1 gigabyte access.

Goals take money. In Detroit alone, Hudson said, rolling out 1 gig would cost \$300 million to \$400 million.

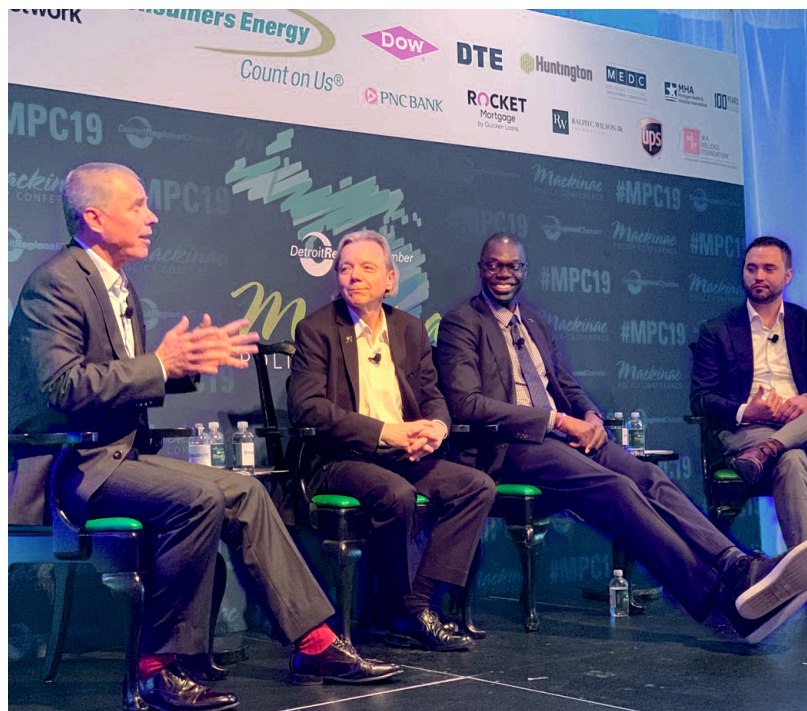
And what of the 5G, a tempting technology looming on the horizon? It’s not a cure-all, the panelists say. It increases options but will require years to take hold, and it won’t help rural residents, Bauer said. What might help those areas, Gilchrist said, is that the federal government

has dollars available to foster rural connectivity.

All three panelists agreed that the broadband challenge going forward requires collaboration from internet providers and governments. And the solutions in Detroit will differ from those in Delta County in the Upper Peninsula, Gilchrist said.

One factor that offers some hope: Improving broadband infrastructure is one of the few bipartisan issues in Lansing.

“I am confident that if Michigan communities are better connected, if Michigan children are better connected,” Gilchrist said, “that the state will be the better for it.”



Featured in photo (from left to right): Joe Sawasky, Dr. Johannes Bauer, Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist II, Marc Hudson

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