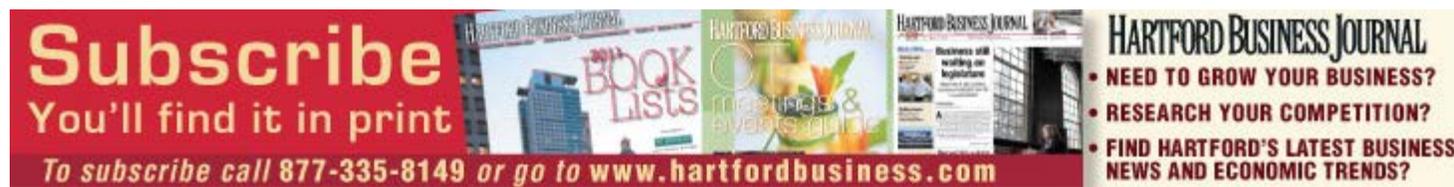


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State must invest in ultra-high-speed Internet

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There has been lots of talk on the campaign trail and among business advocates lately about the need for Connecticut to spend more on its transportation infrastructure, which most people would agree has been underfunded for years.

But there is another form of infrastructure — one that is a lot less tangible and oftentimes overlooked — that state policymakers must put at the top of their priority list: ultra-high-speed gigabit Internet service.

In a Sept. 8 op-ed published in the Hartford Business Journal, Connecticut's Consumer Counsel Elin Katz and State Sen. Beth Bye (D-West Hartford) made a convincing plea for the state to join the "Gig Revolution," where a "growing number of regions across the country — and around the world — are developing low-cost options for gigabit Internet."

We publish plenty of opinion pieces, many of which express good ideas and sound policy proposals, but few have received as much attention and readership as the Katz/Bye op-ed. It immediately became one of our top five most read stories, a clear indication that the subject struck a chord with our business readership.

To be frank, investing in high-speed Internet infrastructure hasn't been an issue high on our priority list, but when you look at the statistics and the economic implications, it is something state policymakers and the business community should look at seriously.

According to Katz and Bye, Connecticut's average Internet connection is about nine megabits per second (Mbps), while a gig network runs 100 times faster at 1,000 Mbps.

While the average Connecticut resident doesn't need ultra-high-speed bandwidth to play movies or download music, high-tech companies — particularly the increasing number of businesses that rely on big data — need it to compete. But Connecticut's lack of a fiber-optic cable network makes it difficult and expensive for businesses to access high-speed Internet, putting them at a competitive disadvantage.

The price of a gig from Comcast, according to one businessman quoted by Katz and Bye, was \$3,000 per month. Conversely, residents in Austin, Texas, Kansas City, Miss., and Chattanooga, Tenn., are paying about \$70 a month for a gig of bandwidth. This demonstrates another example of the higher cost of doing business in Connecticut.

Of course, it's much easier to call for further infrastructure investment than actually get it. The state has allocated some money over the years in the Nutmeg Network, which has helped build a fiber-optic cable system across Connecticut to benefit schools, libraries, and police stations. New Haven, West Hartford, and Stamford recently announced their intentions to bring ultra-high-speed Internet to their respective cities as well.

It's a good start, but the state has a long way to go, and it will require a public-private partnership to fund extensive build out of ultra-high-speed Internet infrastructure.

With the state facing a \$1.4 billion deficit in fiscal 2016, purse strings will be clenched tightly. Calls for greater investment in various aspects of our state's infrastructure — whether it be roads, bridges, or fiber-optic cable — will be tough to come by, mostly likely for years into the future.

State government can't be asked to shoulder this burden alone. The business community must support the initiative and telecom providers must play a role in offering Connecticut consumers affordable ultra-high-speed service.

If we fail to invest in areas important to Connecticut's economic future, the state will continue to find itself lacking a competitive edge keeping and recruiting employers.

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