

When we rolled out “The Big Plan” this fall we stressed that it was our philosophy and guidepost for what we do in the next 3 years for Minnesota.

Now we have some specifics:

One step in creating “healthy, vital communities” is the Telecommunications Strategic Initiative-- we call it TSI.

In order to create competition and make sure everyone has access to state-of-the-art high speed technology, we want to change rules and regulations that affect telecommunications in Minnesota,

Here’s an understatement – there have been a lot of changes in telecommunications since our laws were first written 80 years ago to regulate the phone companies.

80 years ago they didn’t have cable TV, they didn’t have cell phones, and nothing was digital.

And nobody ever even dreamed of the Internet.

Nowadays you can hook a phone line up to your TV and send e-mail through it.

These days the phone company wants to get into the video business and the cable TV company wants to get into the phone business.

And they all want to be internet providers.

Everything is becoming everything else in telecommunications - - and the technical word for it is “convergence.”

The Federal Telecommunications Act of 1996 has authorized this “convergence” - - and its up to each state to make it happen.

Right now our state laws and regulations act as if there is no convergence.

They are written as if each company provided only one service.

This is not only obsolete - - it stifles competition.

How many cable TV companies are in your city?

Chances are, there’s only one.

If you don’t like the service, too bad.

If you want a special channel that’s offered in a different city, too bad.

That’s how long distance telephone service used to be - - - “Ma Bell” had a monopoly, and if you didn’t like it, too bad.

Now it’s a lot different – it seems like there are more long distance phone options every day.

And it’s cheaper than ever, too.

That’s what we want for telecommunications in Minnesota: Competition instead of Monopolies.

We think market forces should be given a chance to improve service, quality and cost in telecommunications.

That’s why Minnesota’s telecommunications laws must be rewritten.

If a law prevents competition, we need to get rid of it.

Every Minnesota resident, metro or rural, must have the power of choice in the telecommunications marketplace.

We want no less than 2 competitors in every market for local phone, high speed data and video programming.

We need to encourage new and faster technologies throughout the state.

I'm not exactly sure what "digits" are, but I do know the faster we move them around the better.

High-speed technology is the wave of the future.

I believe that with more competition, there's a better chance Minnesotans will have a chance to get access to high-speed technologies.

Our Telecommunications Strategic Initiative will put all service providers on a level playing field.

But it will also make a level playing field for all businesses and citizens around the state.

Here in the Twin Cities we're getting to have a pretty advanced telecommunications infrastructure in place - - but there are a lot of places in Greater Minnesota that are way behind.

For example, here's a letter from Irv Risch from Wabasha – he wrote to the editor of the Wabasha County Herald:

It's titled, "We have a telephone problem."

It reads,

“To the editor,

Question: Is Wabasha going to be left behind as the rest of the country moves forward with new technology? We are so far behind with our phone equipment that we can't transmit data across our phone line without data getting lost . . . (it goes on to say) We have two Internet Service Providers, both are at about the same speed – SLOW. . . .It takes me 20 to 30 minutes to get 8 to 10 emails.”

Irv goes on to say that the local phone company refuses to install a high-tech wire called a T-1 line, which I am told is much faster than a regular phone line.

It seems to me that the questions Irv is raising are being echoed all around the state.

How can a business compete these days if they don't have access to the latest high-speed technology?

We don't want a state of “haves” and “have-nots” when it comes to telecommunications.

We don't want a “technology gap.”

We want high-quality, fairly-priced, voice, data and video transmission available to every home and business in Minnesota.

We have a number of specific goals that will make this happen:

We want to establish a way to make sure we can provide the best technology even in the highest cost areas of the state.

According to our plan - when service providers start acting competitively, we will reward them with fewer regulations.

Local phone companies must open their networks to competitors.

With Internet access and phone service now provided by some cable companies, this plan calls for the regulation of cable franchises at the state level.

However, cities would retain control over educational and government access channel programming and would still receive franchise fees from cable operators.

We have a lot more details to our plan.

Fortunately, I've had a lot of brilliant people working on this – including those in the departments of Commerce, Administration, Planning, and Trade & Economic Development.

It's all aiming at a basic goal of the Big Plan - - making sure we have Healthy and Vital Communities wherever you go in Minnesota.

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