



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

We made "healthy, vital communities" a priority ... and we are making that vision a reality.

We introduced the Telecommunications Strategic Initiative designed to create competition and make sure everyone in Minnesota has access to state-of-the-art, high speed technology.

Competition also means lower rates and better service.

Here in Windom and Lakefield, you have only one choice for local phone service or cable TV.

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

If you want a feature 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 different -- there are more long distance phone options every day, and it's cheaper than ever.

That's what we want for telecommunications throughout Minnesota.

The market should be given a chance to improve service, quality and cost.

Consumers will benefit if they have more than one provider to choose from everyday.

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

Every Minnesota resident, metro or rural, must have the power of choice when it comes to telecommunications.

For this to happen, we will have to change rules and regulations that have been on the books for 80 years.

Think about that - - 80 years ago the closest thing to an e-mail message was delivered by telegraph. Now you can hook a phone line up to your TV and send e-mail through it.

In some parts of Minnesota, you can get Internet service from a phone company or a cable company. Some cable companies offer local phone service. Everything is becoming everything else in telecommunications - - and the technical word for it is "convergence."

The Federal Telecommunications Act of 1996 authorized this "convergence" - - and it's up to each state to make it happen:

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

The laws are written as if each company is a distinct monopoly.

This is not only obsolete - - it stifles competition. If a law prevents competition, we need to get rid of it.

We need to encourage new and faster technologies throughout the state. High-speed technology is the wave of the future.

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

Our Telecommunications Strategic Initiative will put all providers of telecommunications services on a level playing field.

Keith Anderson, president of the local union at TORO, recently wrote a letter to the editor of the Cottonwood County Citizen. He said, "The 'Information Superhighway' is the railroad of the future. Those towns with stops on it will thrive, those without a stop will wither away."

I couldn't agree more.

High-speed data and other advanced services are no longer a luxury...they are necessities for business and industry. From TORO to Miller Sellner Equipment, nearly every business depends on these technologies.

If we expect companies to come to Minnesota -- or if we want to keep the businesses we have -- we will need to make sure that they have these services.

A solid telecommunications backbone is a key to economic development ... especially in Greater Minnesota.

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. We want that for Windom and we want it for everyone in Minnesota.

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

We want to establish a way to 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, our 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.

As you know, I believe in self-sufficiency for individuals and for communities. I would rather have private companies provide the competition. But if they don't, a community should be able to step in to solve their own telecommunications problems.

Right now, you can't do that.

Here in Windom, you needed a referendum to allow the city to provide telecommunications services. That's wrong and our plan aims to fix it.

My Telecommunications Strategic Initiative is aimed at a basic goal of the Big Plan--making sure we have a Healthy and Vital Community here in Windom and throughout Minnesota.

Thank you very much.