

Douglas County first in state to win broadband certification

By Anne Knowles, Northern Nevada Business Weekly

Douglas County has added another feather to its economic development cap.

It is the first county in the state to be certified as a Connected Community from Connect Nevada, the state affiliate of Connected Nation, a nonprofit advocating for widespread broadband access.

To receive certification, the county conducted a detailed analysis of its broadband capabilities. A committee of 15 assessed broadband access, use and adoption, according to Tammy James, communications manager in the county's technology services department.

Based on the committee's findings, the county scored 109 points out of a possible 120, exceeding the required 100 points for Connect Nevada certification.

The certification provides county planners with a tool to reassure businesses looking to locate or launch there that the community can meet most of their technology needs.

More important, the snapshot of its broadband capabilities gives the county a roadmap for improvements.

"It doesn't mean we've got services everywhere," says James. "This is a platform for us to build on and to look at how do we improve if we want to be a community that entices businesses into the area."

For example, James says the evaluation highlighted a need to

upgrade broadband access at the county's business parks. "Higher bandwidth is critical for businesses that might have a need to back up data to an East Coast location," says James.

Based on its assessment, the county has 16 broadband providers offering 3 megabits per second service to 96.16 percent of Douglas County households. More than 75 percent of homes have access to 10Mbps service while 92.5 percent have the option of more than one provider. Almost 100 percent have access to mobile broadband.

In the area of adoption, the county has eight digital literacy programs that have trained more than 700 people in the last year and 36 computers available to the public in four public computing centers, including the library.

And in terms of county use, the study identified 10 broadband uses, including education, government and healthcare.

The report also recommends 17 action items, including further analysis of underserved areas, reassessment of telecom contracts, more public computers and development of a broadband training program for small- and medium-sized businesses. The study was presented to the Douglas County commissioners this week.

Connect Nevada is working with other counties to map the state's broadband landscape. Lyon County is expected to submit its report this month and Humboldt, Esmeralda and Storey counties are preparing drafts, according to Lindsey Niedzielski, program manager with Connect Nevada in Carson City. Other counties are in various stages of evaluation.

Niedzielski says some of the counties face various obstacles, especially the high cost of broadband access in some rural areas.

"Some counties are struggling with this and we're helping them figure out what they need to do to move into the 21st

century," she says. "It's an economic development tool and that's the primary reason most counties are interested in it." Connect Nevada is funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration.