

Staying in the Fast Lane

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The Assurant Group pays insurance bills on loans for mortgage companies from across the country and doesn't use postage stamps to send the checks.

Rather, it taps into databases and computer systems in Florida, Indiana and Georgia, said Michael Lawson, vice president of Assurant Group, which plans to expand up to 1,200 employees. Therefore, it needs a big, reliable connection with the Internet.

"We can't do business without it," Lawson said. "The whole premise of our operation is that we can conduct business nationally from a central location."

A local committee wants to make sure that those big connections - known as broadband services - are plentiful here, keeping companies such as the Assurant Group while attracting other businesses.

"It's a new economic development tool like the roads and sewers were in the 20th century," said David Matusoff, government relations manager with the Technology Policy Group, an initiative of the state agency Ohio Supercomputer Center.

The local technology committee grew out of the Springfield-Clark County Chamber of Commerce's Vision 20/20 plan for the future of Springfield and the region. The group consists of about 20 members representing government, private business, education and service providers.

The committee wants to find out how much high-speed Internet access is available and how much more might be needed. The Springfield City Commission listed boosting the technological capacity on its goals and objectives for this year that it drew up during its annual retreat in February.

"We're at the beginning stages of getting together as a community with the chamber, city, county, school systems, large employers, to really try to get our hands around information technology," said Tom Franzen, the city's economic development administrator. "We've all realized that's our future."

The committee wants an in-depth survey of the city's and county's technological capacity. It has talked with the Columbus-based Technology Policy Group to find out.

The researchers did a statewide project last year called "Ecom-Ohio: Assessing Ohio's Readiness for Global Electronic Commerce." The study aimed to promote action by business, government and residents to establish Ohio as a leader in global electronic commerce.

It detailed the number of Internet connections and bandwidth in many cities. Bandwidth measures how much data each of those connections can carry at a time. The assessment listed Springfield as a city with more than 100 percent growth in network infrastructure from 2000 to 2001, along with Columbus, Dayton and Cleveland. Smaller cities such as Lima, Newark, and Athens also showed the high levels of growth.

Now the technology committee wants the policy group to do a similar study specific to Springfield. It likely will measure what services are provided, computer ownership, residents and businesses online, employees with online access at work, businesses with video conferencing, people using wireless mobile devices and government uses.

The assessment will consider how higher education and schools use and teach technology and computer skills so students are ready to enter the workforce.

It also will look at how many businesses and residents use broadband, which is high-speed transmissions such as through cable modems or digital subscriber lines offered through telephone companies.

Franzen, who is a member of the chamber's technology committee, will meet with the policy group July 10 to discuss the specifics of the assessment, including what areas to focus on and how much it will cost, which will be covered through private funding.

The study will give the technology committee members a framework to see what businesses need, Franzen said.

"This is really going to the heart of infrastructure," he said.

Springfield will be the first city to conduct such an assessment, Matusoff said. The researchers studied Lorain County last year.

"Communities need to understand what it looks like locally," Matusoff said.

If a contract is signed, the policy group likely would finish the work by September or October, Matusoff said.

The assessment might show a need for more fiber-optic cable, Internet providers or other infrastructure. If that's the case, the report might spur more providers to get into the market or a private-public project might work, Franzen said.

Another finding of the assessment might be that Springfield is better off than many people thought. The statewide assessment from 2001 showed Springfield had more than twice the bandwidth of Lima, Portsmouth, Athens, Zanesville and Chillicothe. Springfield also exceeded Mansfield.

"The community at large had jumped to the conclusion that we need to increase our level of infrastructure, our bandwidth," Franzen said. "We can't necessarily jump to that conclusion without an assessment."

Many people have the misconception that Springfield is behind the curve, said Hugh Barnett, director of external relations with SBC Ameritech. Many of the technology resources businesses need already exist in Springfield, said Barnett, who also is on the chamber's technology committee.

"There are no services that anybody in Springfield could want that we can't get to now," Barnett said. "We may have to build it out to them, (but) we can get it to them in a very prompt and efficient manner."

The assessment is only part of the answer, explained Robert Kearns, director of communications for the Turner Foundation.

With details from the study in hand, it will be easier to attract information technology companies and traditional businesses to Springfield, Kearns said.

"Then it's the ability to assess and determine what is going to give us a competitive advantage in the future," Kearns said. "Every part of this economy is going to be touched by technology."

Some people may wonder why Springfield wants to recruit software developers or data processing, research or aerospace companies after many of those businesses have gone belly up recently.

The industry will continue to grow and grow fast, Kearns said, and the recent downturn just shook out the lower performers. It's a cycle similar to what most new industries go through, he said.

Springfield is well positioned in a corridor from Cleveland to Columbus, Dayton and Cincinnati, Kearns said, which is a strip that has attracted a lot of technology companies.

So, Jim Lagos, vice chairman and treasurer of the chamber, compared it to living in the middle of the Texas oil patch but not drilling or tapping in.

"It will incorporate every aspect of life, just like when the telephone came out," he said.

This area offers many of the other amenities to attract these companies, such as quality-of-life and an arts and culture community, Kearns said.

It's not just high-tech businesses that need broadband, and high-speed Internet access, Kearns said. Small and large businesses of all kinds need the service.

"One of our strengths is manufacturing," Kearns said. "So what's this got to do with manufacturing? Well, all the manufacturing processes are becoming digitally driven. Suppliers are going to be supplying information digitally. They are going to be doing all the back-office work using technology."

Matusoff pointed to automakers and the Covisint Website, which connects parts suppliers to the big manufactures and streamlines purchases.

The new machines in many plants also are networked together, Franzen said. Several manufacturers in Clark County already use such sophisticated processes, including Moyno Industries, Rittal and International Truck and Engine Corp. Engineers at the Aldi distributing facility in PrimeOhio Corporate Park can monitor cooling systems from their homes.

Another high demand could come from a large, regional hospital if Community Hospital and Mercy Medical Center merge as proposed. The Credit Life Building at 1 S. Limestone offers its tenants broadband.

When the new Springfield City Schools are built, the facilities will be wired for high-speed access, said Ed Weisenbach, director of technology and management information systems for the district.

It's undecided what type of connection will go into the schools. He wants fiber-optic cable, which allows video, audio and data to move across one line. If that's not available it will use what's called a T-1 connection, which is twice as fast as DSL.

The district has a little less than 18 months to decide in order to be ready for the opening dates.

With early estimates between \$23,000 and \$30,000 per mile for fiber optics, it might be too expensive for the district to buy he said. So the district could lease the lines.

The cost might be worth it, Weisenbach said, as technology becomes more important in the classroom.

A teacher might lose valuable teaching time, he said, while students anxiously wait for images or files to be downloaded.

"What price do you put on the effective delivery of quality instruction?" he asked.

Transferring files and downloading information takes too long typically on dial-up services. Broadband is more reliable than telephone modem services, which cannot promise the same speed each time, Matusoff said.

Additionally the committee hopes to eventually see classes, possibly with the Small Business Development Center, for smaller companies. There, people could learn how to integrate technology into their work.

"You may not need as much bandwidth, but certainly every business eventually is going to need fiber-optic cable, even low-tech businesses like law firms," Lagos said. "For everything from accounting to insurance, we need to have this available."

