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Getting the message

County urged to boost communications tech

Arizona Corporation Commission Chairman Tom Forese issued a call last week for the private and public sectors to join forces to improve Yuma County's telephone and communications infrastructure, in particular to help agribusinesses maintain their technical advances.

"Yuma is known as the Silicon Valley of agriculture for its innovative use of technology in food production," he said in the statement. "However, limitations to phone and broadband services for Yuma's agribusiness are becoming barriers for the city's competitive edge in the world market."

Citing the area for providing up to 90 percent of the U.S.' lettuce, spinach, broccoli and cauliflower during the winter, Forese said low bandwidth and unreliable cellular service could lead to national security concerns.

He said in an interview Friday that he was approached by a group of mostly agricultural community leaders from Yuma a few months ago. "This conversation was about making sure we were taking care of the businesses we already had.

"And the conversation took a turn to the concern they had that the internet speeds they had access to actually limited their ability to use the latest software, as they had a reputation for being on the cutting edge."

His research after the meeting showed that cellular service for Yuma average about 3 to 6 megabytes per second, while for the East Valley area of Phoenix metro gets about 70 per second. Forese said he went around parts of Yuma County with a meter to check the strength of its signals, and the results were pretty distressing."

He said the farming interests are not just seeking better connectivity for themselves but the entire Yuma community. He called the agreement the city of Yuma just reached with anyCOMM Holdings which would provide it a citywide high-speed wireless network "very interesting.

"And instead of advocating for one solution or the other, I'm looking as a whole for all providers to come to the table and tell the commission, and the Legislature and the governor's office, what they're going to do for Yuma."

Paul Brierley, executive director for the Yuma Center for Excellence in Desert Agriculture, said he was part of the group that approached Forese, which included producers, irrigation district representatives, educators and other community leaders concerned about the issue.

"We rely on a lot of communications, beginning from basic cell calls to the more high-tech remote sensing and data acquisition, but a lot of it is just based on the fact we don't have enough infrastructure for the basic phone calls and the broadband for offices to teleconferences and things like that," he said.

Brierley said there's a growing consensus, including himself, around the county that the quality of mobile phone service has gone down this year, and the usual summer respite when there are fewer users hasn't happened.

The center for excellence, located at the University of Arizona's Yuma Ag Center at 8th Street and Somerton Avenue, had problems with its phones and couldn't hold video conferences for its first two years, until a special point-to-point wireless connection, requiring the university to get an antenna with special FCC clearance, was put in around the end of last year.

"In the meantime, I've got companies that want to test the 'internet of things' and remote sensing, and we didn't have the throughput, we couldn't get it. Even the university struggled to have just acceptable internet, nothing special, and I need something special to test out some of the research that we want to do, and we didn't have the basics," he said.

He added he and others at UA are discussing ways they be able to help expand broadband access in the area.

Forese was vague about exactly what needs to be done in order to upgrade connections throughout Yuma.

"It's a number of things, which makes me hesitant at this point, because, rather than calling anyone out, this is really about working with everyone. I can say the commission is involved, the governor's office and Legislature is involved, and representatives in D.C. are involved as well. So this has the attention of all the right people."

He said representatives from the office of U.S. Sen. Jeff Flake, who was in Yuma last week, are involved in the talks.

With each of the providers we'll be talking about small, immediate steps, longer-term steps and just their involvement in this crucial area of the state," he said. "What we're finding right now is everyone wants to come to the table and everyone wants to help."

Corporation Commissioner Andy Tobin, who frequently focuses on issues involving rural areas of the state, is also involved in the effort, he said.

Brierley said all of Arizona's rural areas at times find themselves behind the technology curve because they often don't get much attention from telecommunications providers, compared to Phoenix and Tucson.

“It’s even more important for the rural areas today, because with broadband connectivity we have a chance to be a part of the global economy even though we are in remote areas, and so it’s really a key to economic development. And Chairman Forese sees that and wants to make sure companies are reminded of that,” he said.

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