



Lessons from Summit 2007

By Steven S. Ross ■ *Editor-in-Chief*

The triple play was barely mentioned at this year's Broadband Summit in Dallas, as property owners, managers, developers, network builders and content providers looked ahead a few years. They liked the view:

- User demand for 50 Mbps to 100 Mbps
- Lower deployment costs
- Better software for network control and customer billing
- New fiber technology, making MDU deployments easier

They heard numerous presentations expressing nervousness and frustration about two issues, however:

- The potential for sloppiness in the building of "inside plant," especially laying of fiber and coax in MDUs
- The need for fine-tuning federal and state policies to encourage building of the networks that will be needed over the next decade to handle the "exaflood" of data over our networks

The inside plant issue is especially galling to many large-scale property owners and managers, because missteps made today risk repeating the mistakes made installing coax cable over the past two decades. Henry Pye of JPI Partners, Richard Holtz of InfiniSys and Patrick Sims of ADC (a top property manager, top network designer and top vendor/educator, respectively) could not have been more clear: Existing cable plant is often inadequate for today's bandwidth demands, let alone emerging needs. That's bad enough for the industry. But it is also downright dangerous. Installers either ignore or are ignorant of life safety codes for multiple-dwelling structures. Building inspectors look the other way.

Life Safety

The proof: Appalling images showing coax improperly grounded, or inexpensive

cable meant for outside and single-family use, deployed in ways that could spread fire or toxic fumes inside an MDU.

The Summit experts agreed that fiber inside plant could head down the same sorry path. Grounding, at least, is less of an issue (optical fiber does not, of course, conduct electricity). But there are far more varieties of fiber than there ever were for coax (a problem when specifying for fire safety, especially when existing fiber networks are modified), and fiber is somewhat brittle, and thus less forgiving when it comes to bends, stretching, and kinks. Bandwidth demands on fiber are far, far higher than for coax, too. Over the next few decades, fiber being installed today will be called upon to carry 2 Gbps or more to a dwelling unit – 400 times the 5 Mbps that coax has trouble handling now.

The nation's educational "establishment" has stepped forward – groups that certify technicians, such as BICSI and CEDIA, have been active. And there are now about 200 colleges busy retraining technicians (see, for instance, TheFOA.org for details). But almost all of the technicians I've observed being trained are independents or employees of small companies. I have seen few employees of communications giants (in fairness, they often train their own personnel while using outside contractors as well) and have yet to see a single municipal code official.

That's a failure of government, and it is within the ability of our industry to help solve it – by highlighting the problem, and existing life safety issues, to start.

Another Failure

The more general government failure has been with regard to developing a coherent regulatory and economic policy with regard to fiber. To be clear,

this "government" failure is due in large part to the unwillingness of giant telecommunications companies and large bandwidth users to compromise and to see beyond their own short-term business strategies.

The incumbents, for instance, insist on defending the status quo with regard to the traditional triple play services – voice, video and data. That's odd, because (as detailed at the Summit) all three are fast becoming commodities. VoIP services are often a free or nearly-free add-on for smaller providers, video is moving away from the "cable TV" model toward IP-delivered streams to computers, phones, game consoles and "television sets" that don't look anything like what people were buying just a few years ago. And prices for raw data capacity per Mbps delivered are falling sharply.

That means it could be up to visionaries at the FCC (we've met a precious few, bound and gagged in the hall closets) and Congress (we've met more than a few, but they all seem to be asking for campaign contributions rather than thinking about broadband).

One bright ray of hope: The Connect-Kentucky model, a public-private partnership discussed by many at the Summit, is right on schedule to bring broadband to every one of Kentucky's 120 counties by the end of 2007. It's about to be cloned in Tennessee. And another dozen states are looking at the idea.

Read all about it in this year's extensive Summit coverage. And don't miss Summit 2008 – now a spring event.

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