



FCC Agrees to Better Broadband Reports

By Steven S. Ross ■ *Editor-in-Chief*

On March 19, the Federal Communications Commission finally agreed to most of the demands of state and local officials who have been trying for years to gather data on broadband use.

The FCC will now collect detailed broadband customer and availability information on the census tract level – no more claiming that every household in a postal ZIP code gets broadband if at least one is served – and detailed information about the download and upload speeds of broadband services offered specifically to consumers. Gone also is the idea of treating anything faster than 200 Kbps the same way – from the slowest DSL to the 1 Gbps offered by some providers on a limited basis.

The FCC will now define “broadband” as any Internet connection that is not dialup, and requires that offerings be listed by bandwidth. The reporting tiers are:

- First Generation Data: 200 Kbps up to 768 Kbps
- Basic Broadband : 768 Kbps to 1.5 Mbps
- 1.5 Mbps to 3.0 Mbps
- 3.0 Mbps to 6.0 Mbps
- 6.0 Mbps and above

The FCC aims to map residential broadband usage in enough detail to truly distinguish between unserved and underserved areas. Census tracts are generally smaller than ZIP codes, but not always. ZIP codes with only a few hundred families are fairly common, especially in rural areas. Census tracts are more uniform in size, and rarely have fewer than 5,000 households. This is because the most detailed census data is released at the tract level, and the data are so detailed that unless the tracts encompass many, many households it

Detailed customer, speed, and availability data to be gathered on the census tract level – a boon to local policymakers and network providers.

would be possible to uniquely identify specific families by household size, race, ethnicity, housing type and so forth.

TRACT VS. ZIP CODE

To account for that, the FCC will require more detail than the current “one drop of service” in the tract to count the whole tract as having broadband at a specific tier level.

One huge advantage for those gathering trend data is that tract boundaries rarely change. As tracts grow, they are subdivided – split into smaller tracts – but when a single tract is, for instance, split into two tracts, combined they share the boundary of the original tract. ZIP codes, in contrast, are often created, renumbered, combined or split.

Another big advantage is that most marketing software is designed to use census data in the first place. While it is true that the census will report data a ZIP code at a time, and that some data systems convert from tract to ZIP on the fly, it is almost always far easier to combine census and non-census data when everything is in tracts. Bureau of the Census even provides the computerized outline maps of tract boundaries.

Commissioner Deborah Taylor Tate voted for the change but also noted that “it is important that the Commission not hamper or undermine initiatives that are being undertaken by state and local governments in this area. Some state agencies are worried that broadband providers will hold back data until the FCC requires that it be filed at the Federal level, or that they will resist reporting data in other than the FCC categories.

TIER LEVELS AWKWARD AT HIGH END

One issue for us is that the highest tier seems specifically set so as not to differentiate between today’s typical cable modem speeds, the faster DOCSIS 3.0, FTTN with VDSL, and full fiber-to-the-home service.

Tate also worried about the fast rule turnaround by the commission. “While I fully recognize and support the need for the Commission to continue to update the evolving speeds and definitions of broadband as the marketplace develops,” she said, “we must also be cognizant of any unintended consequences to programs that rely on our current definitions. To insure that everyone – even those with lower speeds or older technologies – is counted, and also to insure that by adopting new definitions today we do not disrupt any of the funding opportunities – whether through the FCC, the Department of Agriculture, Department of Commerce, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Education, Appalachian Regional Commission, or even state grants” she said she favored a short delay to research such issues.

We hope and expect that any such issues come to light quickly and are easily resolved.

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