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Tucked away in the \$789 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, better known as the stimulus bill, was \$7.2 billion to promote improved Internet service in rural communities. Critics of the stimulus plan have pointed to the Internet grants as examples of pork — “cyberbridges to nowhere,” as one skeptic labeled them. Not many jobs will be created directly, and rural areas benefiting from the grants will receive a subsidy for a service that in other places must pass the unforgiving test of the marketplace.

Yet when the Lane Council of Governments won an \$8.3 million grant for broadband improvements in parts of Lane, Douglas and Klamath counties, the benefits of this portion of the stimulus plan became clear.

An important goal of the plan is not only to spend money in ways that reduce unemployment, but to make investments that will build a foundation for lasting recovery. LCOG’s grant will extend a service to rural areas that is as important in the 21st century as highways were in the 20th, or railroads in the 19th. Without high-speed communications links, places such as Oakridge and Myrtle Creek might not have much of a future.

LCOG coordinated the efforts of the regional fiber optics consortia and telecommunications companies to win the grant. By the end of 2011 the grant will bring high-speed broadband connections to unserved “critical institutions” — schools, hospitals, clinics, libraries and police and fire stations — in Coburg, Cottage Grove, Creswell, Eugene, Florence, Junction City, Lowell, Oakridge, Springfield and Veneta in Lane County, and similar communities in Douglas and Klamath counties.

This will not be a comprehensive high-speed network, connecting every home and business. It will be what’s called a “middle mile” system, providing the backbone and arteries from which private operators could extend “last mile” service to residential and commercial customers. But the critical institutions need fast Internet service most urgently, and the grant ensures that they’ll get it soon.

Consider the case of schools. Smaller school districts in rural areas have the greatest need for access to the burgeoning online offerings in science, math, languages and other fields. The Lane Education Service District has a digital video library, but a school that relies on telephone lines for Internet service has the capacity to view only one video at a time. With broadband, every classroom or every student in a school can use online material simultaneously. More important, two-way communication can occur, so that students in Lowell can ask questions of a teacher in Denver or show their work to peers around the world.

That’s the direction education is going — and if rural schools can’t interact globally, families with school-aged children will locate elsewhere. The same goes for medical facilities that need high-speed, interactive imaging and diagnostic services, and for public safety agencies that need fast, comprehensive communications.

This service will be subsidized. In a pure free market, rural communities would wait until telecommunications companies found it profitable to extend broadband service at a cost they could afford. Yet past generations did not wait for the market to bring electric, telephone or mail services to rural areas — they recognized the value of universal services and invested public resources to provide them. They also recognized that by making such investments, the social and economic costs of allowing rural communities to wither could be avoided.

LCOG won’t be building a cyber-bridge to nowhere. Without the broadband bridge, real places inhabited by real people will be consigned to becoming nowhere.