

High-Tech 'Info Highway' Touted As Rural Growth Catalyst

BY SUSAN USHER

Speakers painted a vision of rural areas such as Brunswick County reaping the benefits of new telecommunications technology in the classroom and in business recruitment at a daylong conference held simultaneously at five locations statewide last week.

The Rural Tele-Forum was intended to give participants a taste of how North Carolina's pace-setting new Information Highway will function, start them thinking about its potential in their own communities, and motivate them to spread the word.

However, while Wednesday's sampling whetted interest in the highway's potential, it also spotlighted some of the challenges to be overcome before the average North Carolinian begins to understand or use the highway to personal advantage.

When traffic begins in August on the North Carolina Information Highway, it will provide government, businesses and other subscribers with the latest in telecommunications technology, using fiber optic cables that increase the speed and clarity of voice, data and video transmissions. It will serve as the "backbone" of a growing infrastruc-

ture, a network of roadways—wireless and coaxial and fiber optic cable—that all provide the immediacy of two-way communications and link users to fellow communicators around the world.

The technology should be "transparent," said Tabor City native Jane Patterson Smith, Gov. Jim Hunt's senior advisor for technology, policy and budget and "godmother" of the Information Highway. "What's important is what we deliver on the highway."

And what the highway can deliver is a shrinking of the distance from markets and lack of access to information that have traditionally been disadvantages for rural businesses and rural communities in general.

Businessman Dick Snelling, former BellSouth of Atlanta executive; Billy Ray Hall, president of the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center; and Patterson were quick to advocate the locating of businesses in rural areas that previously had no choice but to locate in urban areas. And, for attracting current businesses and businesses of the future, they expect telecommunications to rank higher as a drawing card than other forms of infrastructure such as water, sewer and gas.

Generally last week's conference worked as planned, showing how

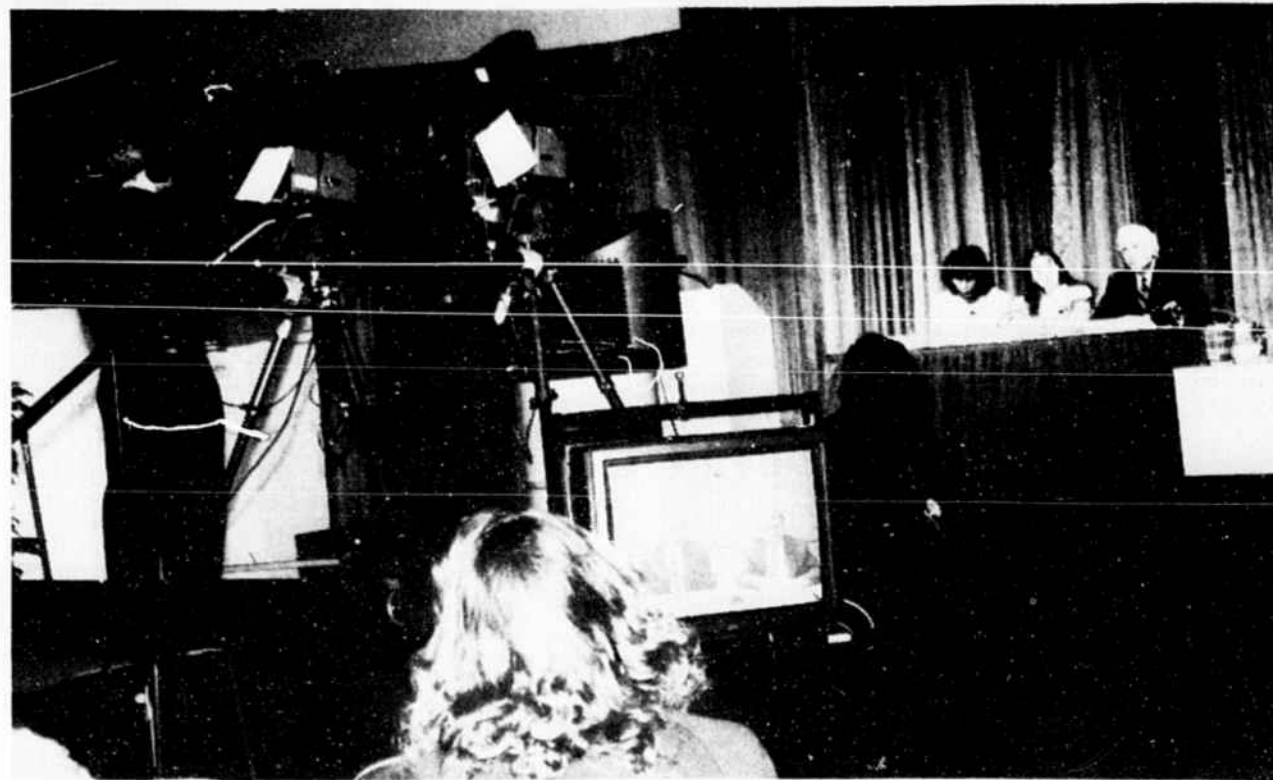
the "highway" system of the next century can work.

It linked approximately 800 participants at five sites—in Wilmington, Raleigh, Boone, Greenville and Charlotte. TV screens and microphones allowed audience members to hear and see presentations made at each of the other locations and to ask questions of the speakers at any location.

However, participants also experienced occasional loss of video and/or audio reception and, at the Wilmington site, sat in near-darkness most of the day. Audience members with questions for speakers had to cross a stage and sit under a spotlight.

And then there was the human element, as when a patient failed to show up for his appointment at Roanoke-Chowan Hospital in Ahoskie. He went hunting instead.

Viewers were to have observed an interactive consultation that involved a doctor and his patient in rural Ahoskie, and a dermatologist at the nearest teaching hospital, at East Carolina University in Greenville. Instead they saw photographs taken earlier of the patient's feet, and close-up TV views of skin lesions on another doctor's ears.



STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

A TRANSMISSION FROM BOONE appears on monitors and a giant screen while audience members and (at right rear) UNC-W Vice Chancellor Michelle Howard-Vital, distance-learning Japanese language teacher Yoko Kano and Chancellor James Leutze wait to offer their own comments or questions.

However, possibilities for tele-medicine are exciting, as pointed out from the Boone forum site by Bill McCaughan, director of Texas Tech University's HealthNet, a tele-medicine network serving rural Texas.

"Because of the interaction of physicians, the patient and their family," he said, "a tele-medicine consultation produces a level and quality of information much higher than you get when simply forwarding a patient by referral."

Still, Gov. Hunt expects the network to have its most dramatic impact on education, through distance learning networks. He foresees providing more students with access to upper-level classes and the state's best teachers, better coordination between public schools and higher education institutions, and better staff development.

"This can improve education dramatically," said Hunt during his brief visit to the tele-forum site in Wilmington. "We need to be aggressive in pushing for this."

"The next several years will be a very exciting time to live in North Carolina. The whole world is watching. Our challenge is to really make it work for us."

The state has committed itself to becoming the biggest user of the highway, helping bring down the cost for other users. It will also help

underwrite some of the initial costs for the first institutions to link to the highway.

But funding for equipment, on-line telephone costs and training educators to take advantage of the technology was a common concern Wednesday of all audience members, including local educators.

Hunt encouraged lobbying legislators to budget more money for the Information Highway this coming year, a follow-up to the \$4.4 million allocated this year.

"Share with the people in your

community, the private and public sectors, the business community, what these possibilities are through 'town meetings,'" he added. "Get people talking, thinking and asking 'What should be put in our county, city, school budget?'"

Hunt's focus on the new technology's impact on education "gets to the heart of how we change this state fundamentally and pretty rapidly," said former UNC President William Friday in his closing remarks. "We need to empower people to use this technology."

NEED MORE TECHNOLOGY MONEY

County Sites Will Connect To North Carolina 'Highway'

Two Brunswick County sites will be among the first to be connected when North Carolina's Information Highway gets "switched on" this coming summer.

West Brunswick High School and Brunswick Community College recently shared in a federal Rural Electrification Administration (REA) grant to provide some of the equipment needed to link them to a regional long-distance learning network based at UNC-Wilmington.

They expect to each equip and set aside one classroom for network use, and for the state to initially help subsidize some operating costs.

However, as with other potential highway sites and other high-technology users, Brunswick County educators have questions about who is going to pay the bill.

In the Brunswick County Schools, for example, funding for expansion of the technology program came from a \$1 million separate allocation from county commissioners this year. Unless more funds are allocated for the 1994-95 fiscal year the system won't be able to continue operating as it has, much less expand, indicated West Brunswick High School Principal Ed Lemon.

The technology program in the public schools follows the general structure recommended by Dick Snelling at the Tele-Forum, linking those with curriculum expertise with other people with technical expertise.

Here each of the 12 schools has a computer lab coordinator and each of the three attendance districts has a technical support person who is in turn supported by the central office staff.

"They are what keep the system operating," said Lemon. "We're in good shape now, but we may lose

some of those people because the money is about to run out."

Science teachers and students at West, he said, are ready to use more technology. One of their goals, for instance, is a direct connection to Internet, a network that includes access to supercomputers and to the Library of Congress database and others. Lemon also wants the public to be able to access the network through West Brunswick High.

Director of Technology Gene Zuck echoed those same concerns for future funding and securing access for users.

"We definitely need all the support and involvement from the community we can get," he said. "That's going to be real important. We've got to have it."

Smith Is Selected As The Employee Of The Month

Linda Smith has been chosen as The Brunswick Hospital's employee of the month for January.

She serves as the accounts payable clerk in the accounting department and has been a staff member for three years.

A fellow employee who nominated Smith said, "Linda exceeds all expectations of her with an extreme emphasis on accuracy. She is very deserving of this award because she has a strong desire to assist her coworkers without complaining and she always wears a smile."

Smith received a hospital shirt, a complimentary meal and a cash prize.

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