



Consultant: Communities must get line on future

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The cost of a modern information network, Frank Knott says, must be borne by everyone who benefits.

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Several years ago, the president of a regional telephone company sat down for a 1 1/2 hour meeting with his many vice presidents and a Baltimore based consultant, Frank Knott. The session lasted five hours as Knott, a former chairman of Maryland's Information Technology Board, promoted construction of a far flung, fiber optics communications network with universal access and shared costs.

Finally, Knott recalled during an interview in York on Tuesday, the telephone company's president saw the light. "I think I got it," the president said, in what Knott happily calls his "My Fair Lady" moment. (In the popular play, later a movie, a professor teaches a flower girl to speak proper English.)

Fiber optic lines, if extended to every school, college and university in the company's franchise area, also would pass by nearly every home and business. Then, as more and more people made use of the network for continuing education and the like, their communities would thrive.

The bad news, Knott said during a talk with technology managers at The Valencia Ballroom, is that some communities won't grow at all if they don't commit to improving the networks they share. "How many of you," he asked, "think you would get a road built by your local government to your house or business if you were the only one asking for it?"

"I am convinced that communities are at risk," he said, "if we don't look at our individual homes, our individual businesses and our individual governments, and use technology to link ourselves together."

The fiber optic system that Knott imagines would be useful in myriad ways to manufacturers, students and scholars, and local governments. It would be as ubiquitous as ordinary telephone lines today but never free. Such projects, Knott said, in an interview after his talk, work only when each user pays part of the cost. "We Americans are motivated by skin in the game," he said using a slang word for money. "That's the way we are."

Still, in many places, educational institutions struggle to finance the communications networks necessary for long distance learning. "Because they're the only ones who use it, right?" he asked. "Wrong." GTE, which provides local telephone service to most of York County, sponsored Knott's presentation as Part of its daylong "GTE University." Through the university series, hosted annually in the company's local service markets, GTE keeps clients up to date on communications technology.

"The idea is that if the community is strong, GTE will be strong," said Judy Fronzaglia, the company's director of economic development in York.

Separately on Tuesday, at the Yorktowne Hotel, Knott spoke with chief executive officers of local companies. The message there, he said, was substantially the same: It's time to leap, as a group, into the information age.

Knott, as founder and president of the consulting firm Vital Resources, has helped establish community information



networks across the United States and Canada. Some examples:

In Texas, six school districts linked their computer systems, then shared educational software. They saved money on purchases as a result.

A school district in California created a wide area network, then rented its classrooms to businesses for use in continuing education. For a fee, the school district also provided lessons to prisoners in the local jails.

In Wilmington, N.C., a hospital was forced to recruit employees from other areas because graduates of the local schools lacked the right training. After the hospital offered career seminars via a community network, the school system reported that enrollment in science courses jumped 50 percent.

Hospitals in Tampa, Fla., wanted a fiber optic network. Meanwhile, local television stations saw fiber optic "super trunking" as an alternative to sending truckloads of equipment from their studios to sporting events. With a super trunk available at an arena, unwieldy antennae no longer are required. News crews plug their cameras into outlets instead. ,

"It's a funny thing, Knott said. "The hospitals were along the way" and were willing to share in the costs of installation.

Knott's home state, Maryland, jumped ahead in the information networks when Bell Atlantic installed a statewide, fiber optics network and then set out to build (in museums, schools and colleges) 270 classrooms equipped for, distance learning. Thousands of jobs, he said came to Maryland as a result.

Some reason's that occurred, according to Knott the leadership of former Gov. William Donald Schaefer, the timing of a Chamber of Commerce survey on job retention, and the needs of the state education departments.

York County, it turns out, has advantages of its own. A variety of groups are considering ways to encourage regional cooperation, for example. It has two "smart parks" business parks with fiber optic service, and is one of 10 communities nationwide in which GTE has begun to invest heavily, in information networks. "We're working with companies," said Bill Bury, research manager for the York County Industrial Development Corp., who are considering locating to York County because of that."

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