

**Broadband Census for America Symposium**

*Ed. note:* On September 26, Timothy Vollmer, information technology policy analyst for the ALA Office of Information Technology Policy, attended a half-day event hosted by Broadbandcensus.com. The title was straightforward and direct, wasting no time to get to the point—"Broadband Census for America." The following content provides a snapshot of Vollmer's experience at the event, highlighting the importance of improved broadband to the future of libraries and the public in general.

Broadband Census for America was organized to "seek to improve our understanding of current practices in broadband data collection and discuss ways of improving and expanding publicly-available data within the United States."

Rachelle Chong, current California state public utilities commissioner and former FCC commissioner, reinforced a mantra heard throughout the day—organizations need access to robust, accurate broadband data to support efforts to better connect consumers. Chong said California's broadband initiatives receive strong support from state policymakers, including Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who created a state broadband task force to identify barriers and map wireline and wireless broadband availability. In carrying out this mission, Chong found that carriers were often reluctant to provide data. Chong even had to sign nondisclosure agreements with many of the broadband carriers in order to receive street-level data. Later, this information had to be aggregated and the raw data destroyed. Eventually, the task force was able to map competing broadband providers in every census tract in California.

Many speakers championed the idea that broadband is infrastructure. Chong connected broadband to development: "If you don't support broadband, you're not going to have

state-of-the-art technological innovation." She observed that access to broadband is only the first step, we need to tackle the problem of affordability, too. Further, she said that it is necessary for politicians to understand that broadband is a critical infrastructure. If lawmakers think the Internet is a mere "luxury"—and not an essential infrastructural component like the electrical grid—they're not going to fund it.

Art Brodsky, communications director at Public Knowledge, said that broadband data gathering and mapping efforts need to relay the best information available. "To do this right," he said, "we can't have voluntary data collection." He said that in Maryland, carriers have been extremely reluctant to provide broadband data, even going so far as to claim that revealing information about networks could pose a threat to national security (supposedly terrorists could strike the infrastructure).

Drew Clark, executive director of Broadbandcensus.com, said that the public is served best by the greatest possible disclosure of information. He warned that even though FCC collects a lot of detailed information, they refuse to release some of the data, mainly due to confidentiality complaints from carriers. But, by harnessing the power of consumer crowd-sourcing, Broadbandcensus.com allows a user to not only take an Internet speed test, but also provide information about his or her provider and submit comments about quality of service or other issues.

John Windhausen, president of Telepolity Consulting and ALA consultant, extended the idea of broadband as a fundamental infrastructure for an information society to libraries, focusing on issues of connection quality. He said that even though a public library may have a T1 connection, the fact that the connection is shared by a large number of simultaneous users can slow it to a crawl. This alternate facet of the broadband connectivity problem may require us to examine data collection in terms of the user experience, not only institutional access to a pipe. In this situation, he asked, "How much bandwidth is enough?" *WR*

---

W. Alston Roberts III is communications director at ALA's Washington Office, e-mail: wroberts@alawash.org. This month's column was written by Tim Vollmer, information technology policy analyst at ALA's Washington Office, e-mail: tvollmer@ala.org