

# A Shared Vision



## for Minnesota

A description and follow-up results of the "Grassroots Call to Action: Telecommunications for Rural Minnesota" — a shared vision process held June 28 - 30, 1995, at St. Cloud State University.

*This report was compiled by the follow-up task force participants, with editing by Jane Leonard and JoAnne Johnson. Its contents reflect the statements and ideas of conference participants who represented business, community, education, government, health care, non-profit, and telecommunications provider interests.  
Report compiled July-September, 1995.*

# Minnesota Rural Telecommunications Task Force Report

## Executive Summary

### *Introduction:*

In the Fall of 1994, a handful of people representing telecommunications providers, local citizens, state and federal government, education and business, gathered at St. Cloud State University to begin planning what would eventually become the inaugural "Grassroots Call to Action: Telecommunications for Rural Minnesota," a statewide conference to develop a shared vision for telecommunications development in Minnesota, held in St. Cloud, June 28-30, 1995. What followed represents an extraordinary and unprecedented collaborative effort, with grassroots discussion, planning, and action between telecommunication providers and consumers alike, between the public, nonprofit, and private sectors based on a common thread of agreement -- concern for the sustainability of the communities in which we all live.

Conference participants came from all regions of the state and represented all sectors--public, private, and nonprofit. Through a shared vision process they identified problems, solutions, a vision for, and commitments necessary for telecommunications development in Minnesota that would support community and economic development.

The following summarizes the results of that conference. For more details on what led to the conference, what transpired there, and what followed, please refer to the main body of the report and the appendix (which contains all of the concerns and ideas identified by conference participants).

### *Conference Results:*

Participants agreed that much telecommunications activity exists in Minnesota. However, without an overall plan to coordinate the building of Minnesota's information infrastructure and increase our information literacy, we are not in a position to leverage current activity for greater impact, or to measure it against comprehensive state development goals.

Conference participants deliberated not from a technological view, but from a social, community, and economic development perspectives. The keynote speaker, Susan Koch, Ph.D., urged attendees to think about what the problems and possibilities were in their own communities and once these items were identified, apply telecommunications as a tool to solve problems or enhance delivery of services to the community. As a result, the conclusions drawn by the group reflect this community-based assessment process on a statewide level. Their work provides key guidelines for keeping Minnesota on track towards a healthy communications environment.

***"Successful strategies come from envisioning preferred futures, rather than problem solving old dilemmas." -- Marvin Weisbord***

## ***Prioritized results of Shared Vision Process:***

### **Identified Problems:**

#### **1. Lack of focused, informed leadership.**

- Chief among the concerns of the attendees was the lack of informed leadership in telecommunications and information technology at all levels of traditional power. Resulting problems include the lack of comprehensive planning, funding, and regulation of infrastructure improvements, which in turn hampers individuals, businesses and organizations from attaining their development goals.

#### **2. Access to telecommunications resources.**

- Affordable access to data-quality transmission modes and local calling access to the Internet were of great concern to rural Minnesotans. The regulatory sector needs to realize its tremendous impact on development. There are pockets of great progress in affordable access to advanced telecommunications services, and local Internet access is said to be available to 75% of the state. However, regulatory barriers and market-based resource provision still create inequities, in particular in areas of the state where telecommunications could do the most to improve health care, education and commerce opportunities. Although there are just a few towns in Minnesota where sending a fax transmission is difficult, the fact that this handicap still exists frustrates our citizens and businesses. The Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area enjoys a 60-mile local calling radius. Rural communities often face long-distance costs just one mile out of town. This inequity affects us all by impacting overall quality of life in Minnesota.

#### **3. Lack of knowledge and understanding about telecommunications, information resources and their implications in our lives.**

- There is a sense among the citizens of rural Minnesota that if they themselves understood the promise and pitfalls of these technologies, they could make wiser consumer and community decisions in this area. While good training opportunities exist across the state, too few of us know where they exist or how to access them.

***"In a deregulated, market driven industry, rural America does not have the 'market' to 'drive' deployment of the technology." -- Ed Cameron, federal Rural Utilities Service***

### **Identified Solutions:**

#### **1. KNOWLEDGE and UNDERSTANDING to make informed decisions**

- All citizens should gain knowledge AND understanding of telecommunications and information, from the technical and community perspective so that informed decisions can

be made regarding this resource (options on its use, opportunities for community and economic development). Community preparedness could be encouraged through training of community and economic development advisors and citizen leaders.

- Technical folks and community folks speak different languages. We have to learn to understand both sides. Then we will have the comprehensive picture and can communicate our needs to one another.
- It's especially important for public officials and telecommunications providers to gain knowledge and understanding to make wise decisions regarding allocations of and investments in this resource.

## **2. LEADERSHIP to champion the vision**

- Leadership champions this vision, focuses resources (money is there, it is currently fragmented), removes barriers, and encourages, recognizes, reinforces common sense partnerships. In particular it strongly encourages an end to intra- and interagency turf battles by rethinking allocation policy and encouraging comprehensive community behavior and deployment.
- Wise investments in (and access to) resources follow knowledge, understanding and leadership. Current perceived cost barriers are overcome by increased market demand (educated consumers) and the higher future cost of not making educated investments now in people and technology.

## **3. ACCESS is universal and affordable to all communities and citizens**

- Access is universal at home, community, business, and inter-governmental levels.
- Access creates avenues for commerce, education, health care.
- Telecommunications providers partner with government to ensure workable, flexible standards and levels of service; not specific technology use (because technology always changes).
- Government is a major user of telecommunications services; public investments should be locally leveraged to build a more comprehensive community network interconnecting public, private and nonprofit sectors.