

EP native, Eagan COO to head state's ultra high-speed broadband task force

By Paul Wahl - Sun Newspapers

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Rick King once worked as a Division I college hockey referee. Those skills may come in handy in his new role as chairman of the State of Minnesota Ultra High-Speed Broadband Task Force.

The Eden Prairie resident was appointed to the chairmanship by Gov. Tim Pawlenty. The 26-member task force was created in the 2008 legislative session and is charged with constructing a comprehensive statewide plan to achieve a state ultra high-speed broadband goal.

King is executive vice president and chief operations officer of Thomson Reuters North American Legal in Eagan. Also appointed to the task force from Eden Prairie was JoAnne Johnson, manager of government and external relations for the central region states with Frontier Communications.

King has been active in technology circles since early in his career. In 2005, King was asked to serve on a technology task force in Eagan.

"The more I got into the facts and figures, I said this isn't a city issue, this is a global issue," King said.

He concluded Minnesota was lagging behind in high-speed connectivity and needed to begin looking at the future today.

Out of that experience came the Gig Group, whose mantra was 1 gigabyte per second of service to all Minnesotans who want it by 2015. King described that group as a coalition of like-minded cities, counties, businesses and individuals.

Although the disparate voices didn't always agree on every topic, the conversation alone helped move the issue forward.

"At times, when we would try to get a policy statement you could advocate, your coalition would have little leaks in it," King said. "But the bottom line was everyone wanted a policy direction and was looking for leadership."

In 2007 the group supported legislation to take a couple million in state money to study the issue and mandate the 1 gigabyte goal. It didn't make it out of committee.

The group came back in 2008 smarter and better armed.



Rick King is chairman of the State of Minnesota Ultra High-Speed Broadband Task Force. (PAUL WAHL - SUN NEWSPAPERS)

The bill that was passed had neither the funding nor the 1 gig goal, "but the bill does tell the task force to come back with a goal," King said.

Although 20 is generally a larger consensus group than King is accustomed to, he said the diversity of people represented on the task force "ensures a strong partnership between the community, the private sector and the public sector."

Johnson, who was appointed as a representative of telephone companies in the state, said she's grateful for the opportunity since her company is considered midsize and has unique concerns when it comes to providing broadband service.

"Usually it's just the big guys at the table," said Johnson, whose office is in Mound.

Johnson said companies her size generally work closer with their customers and have a better grasp of what they want and need. It's also often more difficult for companies like Frontier to amass capital to invest in technology.

The company serves 160 communities from Stephen to the north to Cannon Falls in the south.

King, who is also a member of the Eden Prairie Budget Advisory Commission and the Flying Cloud Airport Advisory Commission, moved to Eden Prairie five years ago when his position with what was then Thomson without the Reuters (that merger was completed in April 2008) brought him to Minnesota.

He began his career as an educator, teaching math for four years and serving as an administrator for two. His connection with a technology contractor who worked at his school's campus led to a position with that company, WICAT Systems, which was later bought by Minnesota-based Jostens Learning.

King went on to serve as chief technology officer for Ceridian, another company with Minnesota roots.

Although he was new to the community and had new job responsibilities, King said his abiding interest in flying led him to apply for the airport advisory commission.

"I'm fascinated with aviation," said King, who took initial flight instruction courses but dropped out prior to completion due to his hectic schedule.

King figured his chances of being appointed were good since there were no incumbents at the time the commission was reactivated after several years of dormancy. His experience with running large corporations was a plus when names were considered for the budget advisory group. His portion of the Thomson Reuters conglomerate amounts to about a half-billion operating budget annually.

For King, ultra high-speed broadband is both an economic driver and an environmental plus. He cited such use as medical imaging, where a scan is taken in one location and sent to another for reading, as one example. That technology requires an extreme amount of capacity to be functional. High speed also benefits those who work from home, which means more options for employees and their families.

"And if they don't always have to go to the office, you're taking cars off the road," King said.

The task force will have its first meeting Friday, July 25, at the Thomson Reuters complex in Eagan. King said meetings will be 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. the third Friday of each month in Eagan.

The task force will submit a report containing recommendations to the governor and key legislative officials by Nov. 1, 2009. The task force sunsets in March 2010.

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