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# **Battle Brews Over Broadband Mapping**

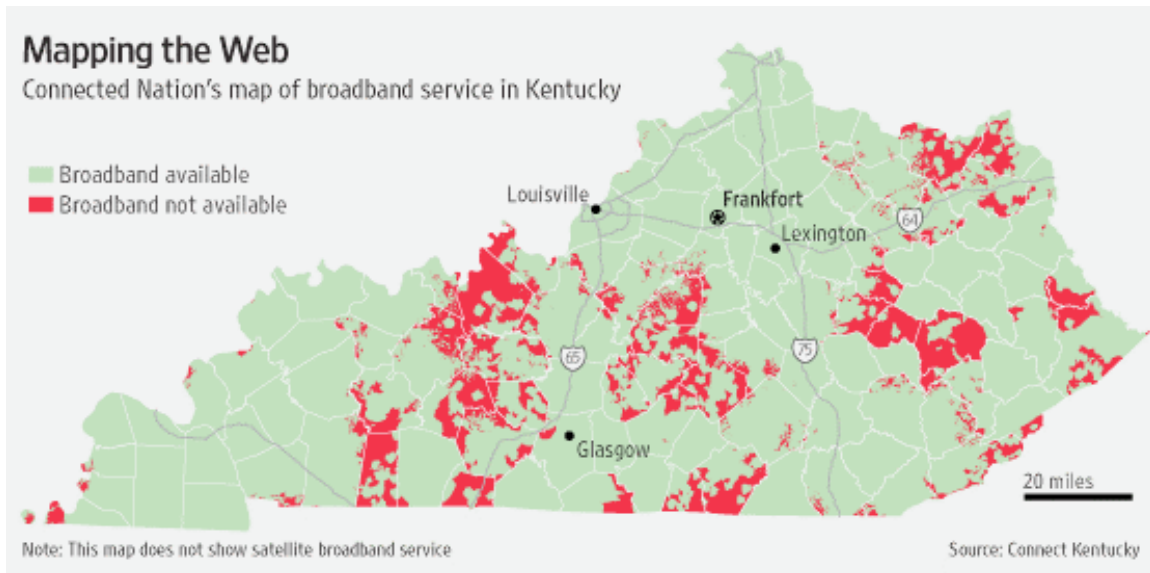
**By AMY SCHATZ**

WASHINGTON -- Before the federal government spends more than \$7 billion to expand broadband Internet service in underserved areas, it wants maps that show where the money should go.

But the biggest U.S. provider of broadband coverage maps, Connected Nation Inc., is backed by big telecommunications companies like Comcast Corp., Verizon Communications Inc. and AT&T Inc. that potentially stand to benefit from how the Obama administration doles out the money.

As it seeks to provide maps for the federal stimulus program, Connected Nation is coming under fire from officials in its home state of Kentucky, and Internet advocates in Washington leery of its industry ties.

Critics complain it uses unverifiable confidential information from phone and cable companies to draw its maps, and worry Connected Nation will use the maps to steer stimulus funds toward its big corporate sponsors, at the expense of smaller players or poorly served areas.



"I think it's a huge conflict of interest to turn our mapping over to the companies that stand to benefit from the results," said Art Brodsky, communications director of Public Knowledge, which has joined with other public-interest groups, including Consumers Union, the publisher of Consumer Reports, to lobby against Connected Nation.

Officials at Connected Nation, which is drawing broadband maps for 10 states, including Minnesota and Tennessee, say Internet providers are the best sources of the data it needs, and say Connected Nation has a "governance framework" for projects that is independent of its board of directors, which includes executives from cable and phone companies.

"Connected Nation is committed to the highest level of transparency and independence when we undertake mapping projects -- whether it be for a state or the entire nation," said Brian Mefford, the nonprofit group's founder and chief executive.

Spokespeople for Comcast, AT&T and Verizon all noted that several nonprofits also sit on Connected Nation's board and disputed the idea that their limited financial support should call its work into question.

"Connected Nation was started in Kentucky; it operated and brought success to the broadband deployment effort in that state before we even heard about it," said David Fish, a Verizon spokesman. "Because it was actually doing good work, we agreed to serve on the board that includes a wide variety of industry and user groups."

Federal officials plan to award upwards of \$350 million for broadband mapping, and those maps will be used to help decide how \$7 billion in stimulus funds will be invested in new Internet lines. With so much money at stake, Internet providers, state officials and consumer groups are sparring over every detail of the program.

Regulators and municipalities in Kentucky are lobbying federal officials to reject Connected Nation's method for mapping Internet availability. State officials say maps produced by Connect Kentucky, a division of Connected Nation, over-estimate availability in some areas. Last year, Kentucky officials cut about \$2 million in funding for the group.

"The Connect Kentucky people say that more than 90% of the state is served, but there are other surveys that have us below that," said Jonathan Miller, Kentucky's finance secretary. "We're trying to dig in and find as much accurate data as possible."

Mr. Mefford said the group's early methods for mapping Kentucky did result in some overstatement and understatement of broadband coverage. But he said it has changed its methods to produce more accurate maps, and it corrects mistakes when notified.

Connected Nation gathers data from Internet providers about where their equipment is located to make estimates about which households can get Internet service. Employees are then sent to the area to double-check that service is available. Surveys of local residents are also used to fine-tune the maps.

"Over time, we've been able to change and improve the methodology and process significantly which has allowed us to address some of the initial shortcomings," Mr. Mefford said.

In April, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce said in a letter to Obama officials that Connected Nation is "an excellent example of a public-private partnership that has already proven successful in several states."

Connected Nation's operations in Kentucky launched in 2004, when Mr. Mefford, the son of a veteran Bell South lobbyist, founded Connect Kentucky to bring more broadband into rural parts of the state. When it began, about 60% of Kentucky had some sort of broadband Internet access, according to Connect Kentucky. Five years later, the group said, that figured had jumped to 95%.

Inside the state, however, there was grumbling. Some smaller broadband providers in Kentucky reported problems with the group's maps, saying they didn't show up on them.

"We started saying, 'What's the deal?'" said Billy Ray, chief executive officer of Glasgow Electric Plant Board in Glasgow, Ky., which offers electricity, cable and Internet service to 8,000 homes and businesses. "We'd provide our information. It went into a black hole," he said.

Connect Kentucky says its maps include data from more than 300 Internet providers and disputes it left smaller carriers off its maps. But regulators in Kentucky and other states, including North Carolina, say they can't verify Connected Nation's data, much of which was protected under nondisclosure agreements.

"What we do protect is the information that a provider deems as the most sensitive," which is typically the locations and descriptions of the hardware that cable and phone providers have installed in the field, Mr. Mefford said.

He added that much of the information Connected Nation collects is publicly available and consumers can use the group's online maps to see which Internet providers serve their homes.

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