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UNIVERSAL SERVICE SUPPORT MECHANISMS

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The Oklahoma Department of Libraries is responding to the request for comments on the Notice of Proposed Rule Making, Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service, CC Docket No. 96-45. The Oklahoma Department of Libraries is the state library agency in Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Department of Libraries has been actively involved for the last several years in telecommunications issues for the libraries in Oklahoma. It is from the perspective of a state library agency that these comments will come.

As is typical in most areas, in Oklahoma the telecommunications environment has been dominated in terms of customers served by a Baby Bell, Southwestern Bell. There are many independent telephone companies serving primarily rural areas, but the dominant force in telecommunications tariffs and rule making has been Southwestern Bell. As the result of a recent rate settlement case with Southwestern Bell, many of the step switches are finally being replaced in the rural areas of Oklahoma. In addition, Southwestern Bell is providing toll free access to Internet providers in the same local area transport areas for their customers in schools, libraries, and vocational-technical schools for a limited time.

The population in Oklahoma is concentrated in a corridor between the two major cities, Oklahoma City and Tulsa. The remaining twenty percent of the population is scattered in small communities all over the state. The state of Oklahoma recently allocated \$9 million to build a series of 33 hubsites for Internet access for schools, libraries, and state agencies. When ODL calculated which public libraries would be able to access the Internet with a local phone call, there were approximately 80. More than one hundred public libraries will have to pay long-distance telephone charges to connect to one of these Internet hubsites. Internet providers are springing up across the state but they are primarily available in the larger communities.

ADVANCED SERVICES

The universal service concept must include access to the Internet by libraries and schools. The Internet in some ways is like the network that the original Communications Bill of 1934 created. Telephones provided the network when the original bill was introduced but the Internet is the emerging network of the future. Just as the original Communications Bill of 1934 defined universal service as more than the contemporary scene, the Telecommunications Bill of 1996 must have a vision of what universal service will be, not just in the immediate future but in the years to come. The Internet is the largest change in the environment of our world since the invention of the telephone and its commercial penetration of our society. It is important to realize that public libraries in the smaller communities will be the major contact for Internet for the adult citizens of Oklahoma. The telecommunications infrastructure is being improved in many of our smaller, rural communities but there are limited options for rural or low-income residents of Oklahoma who are seeking to improve their connection to the world available through the Internet. The national percentage of citizens who own computers with modems is approximately 12%, and it is probably lower than that among rural and/or low-income residents of Oklahoma. It is through the public library that there will be connectivity for the majority of rural and/or low-income residents of Oklahoma. In order to implement universal service, public libraries must be included in the planning, implementation, and delivery of advanced services.

An important foundation for the provision of advanced services by libraries in rural areas of Oklahoma

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would be flat rate service for connection to an Internet provider. The single most beneficial change in the provision of advanced services by libraries and schools in Oklahoma would be line charges that were fixed and predictable. Rural areas that have to pay long-distance charges to connect to an Internet provider are not on a level playing field with those areas who can connect through a local call. An example will illustrate this. In 1995, ODL received a grant from the U.S. Department of Energy from oil overcharge funds that was to upgrade existing computer components so that libraries could better access electronic information. The response from small, rural libraries was reluctance because of fears of having to incur long-distance telephone calls. Libraries weren't even going to apply for these grants for fear that their telephone bills would skyrocket. ***Fixed costs for telecommunications should be strongly considered by the FCC in their deliberations.*** Particularly for smaller or less well-funded libraries, predictable costs are essential. Discounted line charges are important but fixed costs for line charges are the most important factor.

Another important component of provision of advanced services for all areas is the support of the purchase of equipment necessary for providing advanced services. Libraries in Oklahoma vary in funding support but even the best funded are having a real struggle to provide advanced services without cutting other vital services. The Pioneer Library System, headquartered in Norman, Oklahoma, supports a three-county service area. This system is well-funded and very innovative in the services it offers to its patrons. It was the first public library in the state to offer Internet access to its patrons. The cost of the maintenance for the automated services was about \$325,000 last year. There is no way that the system can continue to support these types of costs without cutting services in other areas.

Libraries need access to funds for the purchase of equipment. Smaller libraries have usually received some or all of their computer equipment and software from the Oklahoma Department of Libraries. Most of the computer equipment has been purchased through the federal Library Services and Construction Act. While it appears that there will be a continuing federal role for libraries, the amount of funds available to upgrade equipment must be expanded. ODL is currently upgrading computers in public libraries in Oklahoma to the minimum level* necessary to provide advanced services on the Internet. In many of the smaller, rural libraries the only computer available is the one the library obtained from ODL. Few of the less well-funded libraries have any budget for computer equipment purchase. As computers need more and more speed, power, and capacity to utilize the high-bandwidth functions, it is critical to increase the funds available for the purchase and upgrading of computer equipment in libraries. A recent survey of public libraries showed that technology grants are the top service desired by public libraries regardless of size of the library, location, or funding base.

Another critical factor in the provision of advanced services by libraries is access to funds for training and support. There is an excellent system of vocational-technical education in Oklahoma which will provide some training for some Oklahomans. Public library staff will train many citizens as well. Our state library agency has a staff of five in the Technology Division. These are the staff we have to provide technical support. In addition, ODL has six public library consultants who are increasingly providing technology training to their small library constituency. There are approximately two hundred public libraries in Oklahoma.

*The computers are being upgraded to a 486/66 Mhz motherboard, with 8 mg of RAM, a 520 mg hard drive, a mouse, Windows 3.11, Netscape and a 28.8 modem.

When ODL purchased the first computers for public libraries in 1991, many of the staff at the smaller public libraries were terrified of the computers. It took lots of one-on-one work by the public library consultants with public library staff before any use could be made of the new equipment. Public library staff in some of the rural libraries make minimum wage and have no educational background in libraries. One of the public library consultants told me that she had public librarians whose hands would shake when touching the computer keyboard. Now, after much work by the public library consultants, public library staffs have gained confidence and mastery of some computer skills. The Internet and other advanced services, however, are going to require a whole new round of training. This training will be in groups and one-on-one. Training will be even more necessary because of the need to train the public as well. We are convinced that it is essential to provide high quality, intensive training if the investment in equipment and access is to be realized. The staff in libraries will need the training as well as the publics they serve. ODL doesn't have the resources to provide all the training that is necessary. There must be additional funds available both for initial and ongoing training.