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The Role of Wireless in the New Economy

by Michael W. Shonafelt, Esq.; Partner; Newmeyer & Dillion LLP

These days it's easy to fixate on the wreckage of the last economic order. Maybe it's time to look to the future. By many accounts, the New Economy will arise from the Information Age – a time of unprecedented access to almost infinite data, global social connectivity and powerful applications that download with the click of a button on your handheld device.

As wireless technologies become more accessible worldwide, the data streams that those technologies create are giving rise to bytes of information reaching into the sextillions, otherwise known as "zettabytes" – a one followed by 21 zeros. So much information cannot help but serve as a fertile seedbed for innovation. As Thomas Friedman recently observed in the *New York Times*, "[t]he more information and trends you are able to mine and analyze, and the more talented human capital, bandwidth and computing power you apply to that data, the more innovation you'll get."

Unfortunately, the United States is lagging behind the other players in the international playing field of the emerging Information Age. In a recent ranking of wireless broadband connectivity published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the U.S. came in seventh place, behind such countries as South Korea, Norway and Japan. In hardline broadband access, we perform even worse: 15th place. For the country that played host to the development of the iPhone, the integrated circuit and the Internet, such a showing borders on shocking.

Those in the business of deploying the nation's wireless network may tell you that America's also-ran status is no surprise. Every handheld device connected to a 3G or 4G network requires close proximity to an antenna facility. As our data demands increase, we need a more robust wireless network with greater bandwidth. That requires more antennas. And as we drop our landlines (a growing 26.6 percent of homes have no landline at all) reliable in-home connectivity becomes a necessity, not a luxury. 60 percent of all 911 calls are initiated by a wireless device. That means the antennas need to be closer to our homes.

Americans may love their smartphones, but many of them aren't happy with the antenna facilities needed for them to function. In fact, the wireless industry is facing tremendous opposition from those who want to keep wireless facilities out of their communities. Their reasons range from concerns about aesthetics to unfounded fears about the health effects of radio frequency emissions to diminished property values. Many times, the city officials with the authority to approve or deny permits for wireless facilities would rather err on the side of keeping their constituents happy and deny the permit for installing the antenna facility. As a result, the deployment of the nation's network can become a plodding affair, with deployments sometimes being fought tooth-and-nail, city-by-city, street-by-street. In many cases, the battle is too costly, and the

wireless providers cannot deploy at all. In such cases, wireless opponents often claim a victory for maintaining control over their communities.

No one should doubt the importance of local control over community issues; it's an important aspect of the broader notion of popular sovereignty. But every local consideration should be carefully weighed against the larger national and – in this case, global – implications at play. If the opponents of wireless have their way, much of America may be left out in the cold as the rest of the world benefits from the full flower of the Information Age. In some cases, cities are becoming more conscious of a larger responsibility that transcends overwrought local activism. In Orange County, for instance, a group of local governments has formed the "Association of California Cities." One of the goals of this association is to promote "100 percent connectivity" to ensure "the region's economic viability, as well as ensuring the future of public safety."

Milton Berle once said, "If opportunity doesn't knock, build a door." The opportunities of the near future will emerge from the Information Age. The "door" to let those opportunities knock is a reliable, world-class wireless network. Until our local governmental representatives and their constituents better understand their integral role in positioning America as a global leader in the New Economy, opportunity may just take a rain check.

Michael Shonafelt

Michael Shonafelt is a partner at Newmeyer & Dillion LLP, where he specializes in land use, natural resource and environmental compliance laws. He also serves as a member of the Board of the California Wireless Association, which advocates for the wireless industry. He has a special focus on providing land use and regulatory counsel to wireless telecommunications companies. He can be reached at 949.854.7000 or Michael.shonafelt@ndf.com.

