



Cedar Rapids
Gazette
Cedar Rapids, IA
Circ. 59555
From Page:
8
12/4/2011
42530



THE GAZETTE'S EDITORIAL 209-21-107

Don't jeopardize ICN's public value

Two decades after pushing to create a state-owned fiber optics telecommunications network, Gov. Terry Branstad is now exploring selling or leasing the Iowa Communications Network.

A special commission picked by Branstad is laying out a plan for soliciting private bids for a network with 8,661 miles of fiber cable, about 3,400 owned by the state. Backers of a private-sector deal envision getting out of the telecommunications business while gaining revenue and cutting costs. We also hope a hunt for bids yields innovative private-sector proposals.

But we're also realistic. This

is a complicated issue. And our leaders must make sure that a push for private participation or ownership does not jeopardize the ICN's vital public functions.

Education entities, including community colleges, universities and local schools, account for 79 percent of the ICN's use. Increasing education use has pushed overall ICN usage up 165 percent over the past two years. The network provides Internet access, video conferencing and special programming to 700 wired classrooms.

National Guard armories, state and federal offices, libraries and hospitals are also con-





Cedar Rapids
Gazette
Cedar Rapids, IA
Circ. 59555
From Page:
8
12/4/2011
42530

nected by the network. The state has invested more than \$300 million in the ICN, and officials estimate that the public sector has saved \$300 million in lower fees and in staff and transportation costs saved through videoconferencing. No state general fund money is used to operate the ICN, although tax dollars have been used to keep the network up to date and money will be needed in the future for such upgrades.

Certainly, the ICN's capabilities may make it an attractive investment. But there are sizable barriers.

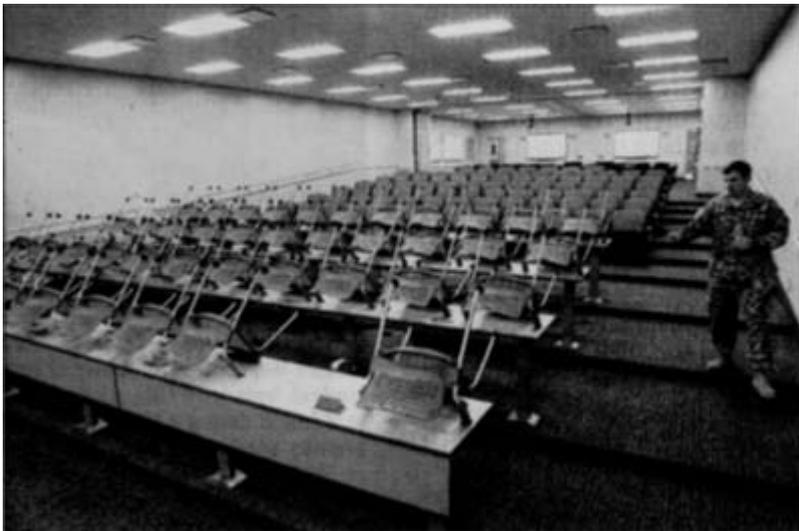
The ICN is basically a closed network for government use, so a buyer would likely find expansion costly. Its hub is inside Camp Dodge's command center, and it's unclear whether the Department of Defense would allow a private firm to operate there. Network right of way beneath roadways costs the state \$1 to lease from the Department of Transportation, but could cost \$3 million for a private firm.

Leasing some of the network's unused bandwidth might be the state's best option. The ICN currently uses about half of its capacity. On the upside, lease deals might provide valuable capacity and improved services for consumers. But they might also shake the current, competitive balance of Iowa's telecommunications marketplace.

The state could continue to own and maintain the network while allowing private firms to provide its products to authorized users. That might benefit local companies, but state costs would remain.

So the idea that Iowa can dump its network for a big payday and big savings is doubtful. It likely will require surgery, not a sell-off. And we urge the governor to respect the high public value of the network he helped found as he writes its next chapter.

■ Comments: thegazette.com/category/opinion/editorial or editorial@sourcemedia.net



Liz Martin/The Gazette

Garrison commander Major Robby Cain of Urbana looks over the Iowa Communications Network classroom, with Internet connections at every seat, at the new Cedar Rapids Armed Forces Reserve Center and Field Maintenance Shop on Oct. 19. The facility houses Iowa Army National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve operations at one site.