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NYT: U.S. Struggles to Keep Pace in Delivering Broadband Service.

WASHINGTON — San Antonio is the seventh-largest city in the United States, a progressive and economically vibrant metropolis of 1.4 million people sprawled across south-central Texas. But the speed of its Internet service is no match for the Latvian capital, Riga, a city of 700,000 on the Baltic Sea.

Riga's average Internet speed is at least two-and-a-half times that of San Antonio's, according to Ookla, a research firm that measures broadband speeds around the globe. In other words, downloading a two-hour high-definition movie takes, on average, 35 minutes in San Antonio — and 13 in Riga.

And the cost of Riga's service is about one-fourth that of San Antonio.

The United States, the country that invented the Internet, is falling dangerously behind in offering high-speed, affordable broadband service to businesses and consumers, according to technology experts and an array of recent studies.

In terms of Internet speed and cost, "ours seems completely out of whack with what we see in the rest of the world," said Susan Crawford, a law professor at Yeshiva University in Manhattan, a former Obama administration technology adviser and a leading critic of American broadband.

The Obama administration effectively agrees. "While this country has made tremendous progress investing in and delivering high-speed broadband to an unprecedented number of Americans, significant areas for improvement remain," said Tom Power, deputy chief technology officer for telecommunications at the White House.

The disagreement comes over how far behind the United States really is in what many people consider as basic a utility as water and electricity — and how much it will affect the nation's technological competitiveness over the next decade. "There aren't any countries ahead of us that have a comparable population distribution," said Richard Bennett, a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, who said that the United States was closing the gap.

But as the Obama administration warned in a report this year: "To create jobs and grow wages at home, and to compete in the global information economy, the delivery of fast, affordable and reliable broadband service to all corners of the United States must be a national imperative."

The World Economic Forum ranked the United States 35th out of 148 countries in Internet bandwidth, a measure of available capacity in a country. Other studies rank the United States anywhere from 14th to 31st in average connection speed.

Generally, fast broadband is considered anything above 10 megabits a second.

In Riga, speeds average 42 megabits a second, but many users had service of 100 to 500 megabits as

of mid-December, according to Ookla. In San Antonio, broadband speeds average about 16 megabits a second. While higher speeds are available through cable television or phone companies, the expense is such that many households in the city cannot afford a connection.

Those faster speeds can mean the difference between thriving and surviving. For Kosmodroms Ltd., a web design and video production studio in Riga, that high-speed connection lets it transfer huge files of video or photos in minutes.

With broadband of only a few megabits a second, it would take so long to transmit the files that the company would be better off delivering them physically, on a disk or thumb-drive, said Agnese Krievkalne, a company director.

Nils Usakovs, the mayor of Riga, said that when private investors started to build Internet infrastructure in the city, no systems were in place, so the builders were able to install the latest, fastest communications technology. "We're the capital of a European Union member country, bordering with Russia," Mr. Usakovs said. "The technology makes this an even more attractive place to invest."

Leticia Ozuna, a former San Antonio councilwoman who worked on the municipal broadband effort, said that in her former district in South San Antonio, some 70 percent of households had no Internet service. Often, she added, students gather at night in the parking lot of the Mission Branch Public Library to do homework using the library's free Wi-Fi connection, long after the library itself has closed.

San Antonio's power company has a largely unused fiber-optic network that local government offices have been using for high-speed Internet service for years, but a Texas law prevents the city from using the network to give low-cost service to consumers.

Fast broadband, said Ron Nirenberg, a San Antonio city councilman, "should be inherent in a 21st-century city."

There is ample evidence that faster broadband spurs economic growth. The White House cites a study of 33 of the largest national economies worldwide, which found that from 2008 to 2010, doubling a country's broadband speed increased gross domestic product by 0.3 percent. In its report, "Four Years of Broadband Growth," the Obama administration says that since 2002, Internet access has contributed an average of \$34 billion a year to the economy, or 0.26 percent of G.D.P. growth.

There is some doubt, however, about how much of that benefit flows to average citizens. The Public Policy Institute of California reported in 2010 that broadband expansion did not appear to affect average wages or the employment rate.

Ms. Crawford, who is also a co-director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard, said that American cities should take on some of the responsibility for building fiber-optic networks and providing broadband service. It is a necessity similar to electricity, she said, "something that no neighborhood or private company would have an incentive to provide on its own to everyone at reasonable prices."

In the United States, speeds vary widely between cities and regions. The fastest speeds are in the Northeastern corridor between Boston and the Washington, D.C., metropolitan region. The three fastest areas — D.C., Massachusetts and Virginia — have average speeds greater than every country except Japan and South Korea.

Some American cities have such superfast broadband that if they were ranked against foreign countries, several, like Bristol, Va., Chattanooga, Tenn., and Lafayette, La., would rank in the top 10.

Those three cities built municipal fiber-optic networks, and those networks can operate just as fast as the swiftest connections in Hong Kong, Seoul and Tokyo. But those speeds can come at a very high price. In Chattanooga, Internet service of 1 gigabit a second costs a consumer \$70. But in Lafayette, the same speed costs nearly \$1,000 a month. In Seoul, it's about \$31 — a result of government subsidies to encourage Internet use.

Even if the United States is improving its worldwide standing, some analysts question the logic of focusing on what country ranks where. "Some people like to look at it as a horse race," said Harold Furchtgott-Roth, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, "but I'm not sure that's the right way to look at it." He added, "We're not at the starting gate, we're not at the finish line. We're somewhere in the middle of the race."

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