Broadband picks up momentum

However, adverse legislation hangs over upbeat report

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Development of Oconee's broadband network picked up momentum in the first quarter of 2012, but county officials remain leery over a bill looming in the South Carolina Legislature that could undermine the project.

The county deployed 114 new network miles for the first quarter period ending March 31 — a 1,300 percent increase over the 10 miles deployed at the end of last year.

Just as impressive was the 70 miles of fiber placed underground, which easily eclipsed the 10 miles of fiber placed through the fourth quarter 2011.

Yet, despite the county's encouraging progress after many early missteps, officials continue to fret about House Bill 3508 and how it could adversely affect the broadband initiative. The bill currently is in the Senate where amendments put forth so far do very little to help Oconee or Orangeburg counties, which are trying to launch broadband networks with the help of multi-million dollar federal grants.

Oconee received a $9.6 million broadband grant in the summer of 2010.

The South Carolina Association of Counties is tracking the bill that's been championed by lobbyists for powerful telecommunications companies trying to avoid having to compete with federally funded broadband networks.

SCAC repudiated the bill's potential to undermine Oconee and Orangeburg's attempt to expand broadband services to unserved and underserved areas. SCAC lashed out at the telecommunication giants.

"Orangeburg & Oconee got a grant to serve areas the commercial providers would not serve," SCAC wrote in its most recent legislative update report. "The commercial providers then complained that they could not compete with subsidized service. This is despite the fact that some of the same complaining companies also got similar federal grants and others get subsidies from the universal service tax placed on consumers' bills."

Kim Wilbanks, project manager for Oconee's broadband project, alluded several times to H3508 in her report filed three weeks ago with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, which oversees use of federal money going to broadband projects across the country.

"If enacted, H3508 will be a job killer and a threat to South Carolina's economic development, educational opportunity, and quality of life ...," Wilbanks wrote. "If the Senate approves H3508, the broadband team will need to revise our business model."

Wilbanks reported that the overall broadband project — a 270-mile middle-mile network — is 65 percent completed, while 60 percent of the network's equipment has been deployed.

Wilbanks said that the county received three shipments of fiber optical cable in the first quarter, and that by the second quarter all the fiber required for the project "will be delivered."

The terms of the grant require that Oconee complete the project by the spring of 2013.

Any federal funds not used by then would have to be returned.

Oconee estimates that the entire project would cost $14.3 million. Through the first quarter 2012, almost $6 million has been spent on the project, of which $3.9 million has come from the Feds.

carlos@dailyjm.com | (864) 882-2375,