Broadband project lagging



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Workers install fiber optic cabling Monday near West-Oak High school as part of the first phase of Oconee's $14.3 million broadband project. Oconee is behind schedule on the project, according to a progress report it submitted to federal overseers.

Report: Oconee County 3 percent done after one year

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Oconee County recently reported to federal overseers that its overall $14.3 million broadband project is merely 3 percent complete more than a year after it received a $9.6 million grant to install a fiber optic network.

Oconee blamed the delay on its decision to re-bid a fiber installation contract. The county submitted its second quarter 2011 progress report to the National Telecommunications Information Administration on Aug. 22.

County Council awarded a $2.7 million contract to Networks Control & Electric of Greer on Aug. 8. The contractor is in charge of installing fiber optic cabling through the first 95 miles of the proposed 270-mile network.

The contractor began working on the first phase just a few days before the county submitted its progress report.

"We are behind schedule due to the fiber installation (request for proposals) being released again," Kim Wilbanks, the broadband project manager, reported to the NTIA. "We hope to be on target at the end of the third quarter of 2011."

Wilbanks assessed Oconee progress on other "key milestones" in the project:

- Network Design, 60 percent complete
- Rights of Way, 50 percent complete
- Construction Permits & Other Approvals, 50 percent complete
- Equipment Procurement, 10 percent complete
- Network Build, none
- Equipment Deployment, none
- Network Testing, none

Wilbanks indicated in the report that the county is currently negotiating lease contracts with three broadband wholesalers or last mile providers. However, as of yet there have been no signed agreements.

Wilbanks stated in the report that the county is confident of catching up.

"With the selections of a fiber installation vendor and an engineering/permitting vendor being accomplished we believe we will be able to get back on track," she said.

Since the project's inception through the end of second quarter 2011, Oconee has spent a total of $405,350, which includes $161,639 from the $9.6 million federal grant and $243,711 in county matching funds.

However, Oconee projects it would ramp up its spending by the end of third quarter.

Wilbanks estimated Oconee would spend $5.6 million by the end of the next quarter, including $3.7 million from the federal grant. Most of the projected spending ($4.8 million) would go toward purchasing equipment.

Aside from providing free or discounted Internet access to all county schools, libraries, the hospital and public safety agencies, the fiber backbone also would facilitate competitive broadband in the county.