Broadband project moving forward

BY GREG OLIVER
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WALHALLA — A Sylva, N.C., company has been awarded a nearly $500,000 contract to provide fiber emergency restoration and maintenance services in order to maintain approximately 250 miles of fiber optic cable and conduit infrastructure in Oconee County.

GeoVision was awarded a maintenance contract for $291,400 for the remainder of the 2013-14 fiscal year, with approval for up to $200,000 of as-needed maintenance services — the majority of the costs to be reimbursed by broadband customers. The firm was one of 23 bidders initially

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notified of the project and the only firm to submit a proposal.

According to the county, the majority of the 250-mile plus network is buried more than 36 inches deep and either installed by horizontal boring or vibratory plowing. The contractor, as outlined in the RFP (request for proposal), will handle two objectives: support the county's needs for restoration, locating, new build and customer connections, engineering, splicing, fiber testing and troubleshooting, egress and maintenance of the fiber network and maintaining the Telvent database, which contains fiber network information for Oconee County.

For those services, which require the firm to provide emergency restoration services for fiber optic cable and conduit infrastructure damage in a timely manner 24 hours per day, seven days a week, 365 days per year, GeoVision will be paid an annual maintenance amount of $291,400.

For the second objective, which is the installation of additional and maintenance of existing fiber-optic intrastructure on an as-needed basis, the company will receive an amount not to exceed $200,000.

Mike Powell, information technology (IT) director for Oconee County, referred to the county's approximately 250-mile broadband as the "middle mile network."

"Nashville, Charlotte, Atlanta and Charleston are the major hubs for the internet, and that's where most of the traffic is," Powell said. "We're basically the conduit between the private sector, the wireless connectors and towns. We're basically providing the middle tower and piping it up the internet and smaller ISPs."

Powell said most of the focus will be on schools, libraries and hospitals, but will also include businesses, such as office parks, and residents not currently being served.

The costs, according to county documents, are expected to be mostly reimbursed by internet service providers and other users of the county's network. The contract is renewable by the administrator for up to four years.

"We looked at our schools, our emergency management and our shelters and there was no connectivity," Powell said. "We wanted to provide at least (1 GB) of connectivity to the schools and emergency offices."

Powell said the county "kind of beat everybody to the punch" since the federal government has recently passed a similar measure. The IT director added that the county's broadband commitment could bring more technology companies to the Golden Corner.

Presently, Powell said schools in Oconee County have 10 GB capacity if they decide to upgrade broadband. However, Joe Rukat, director of technology for the School District of Oconee County, said the district and its schools are in good shape right now.

"Having 10 GB would be really nice, but we don't have the equipment to run it that fast," Rukat said. "We have an analyzer at each school to see if we're using the bandwidth a lot, and, even with the kids touching it, we're hardly using it.

"Currently, I see no bottlenecks in our current situation that would require us to upgrade."

Rukat said he has been in technology since 1983 and broadband "is the best thing I've ever seen."

"I was here when the PCs were on board, when the schools started getting networked and now, with this internet the county has provided us with (at no cost to the school district), it's wonderful," he said. "The work the county has done to get us to this point is amazing. I could not fathom how they could put all these pieces together to make it work. The process was monumental, and, as users, we appreciate everything the county has done for us in that regard. That's one less thing I have to worry about."

Rukat said the district is turning its attention to another priority — providing additional wireless access points in schools.

"As students start bringing in more wireless devices, we will need more access points," Rukat said.

For example, Rukat noted that there are access points every 70 feet at the current Walhalla High School and every 75 feet at other schools that have been in existence for a long time. But the technology director said the new Walhalla High, slated to open in the fall of 2015, will have access points in every two classrooms.

"We have a population of around 10,500 students, and the school district owns 6,000 to 7,000 computers and other devices, such as cellphones, laptops and tablets," he said.

"We may be pushing 7,000 to 8,000 devices, and we're still not 1-to-1 where you have one computer for every one student, like some districts are pushing. At that point, we may need to rethink the 10 GB."