Broadband support emerges

Oconee Chamber of Commerce, schools superintendent rally behind Oconee's $14.3 million project

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WALHALLA — Donnie McMahan of Mountain Rest is tired of waiting on his turtle-slow dial-up modem to connect him to the Internet.

Outside of moving to an area with established broadband service, McMahan saw little hope of seeing high-speed Internet in his community in his lifetime.

When Oconee County announced last summer that it had received a $9.6 million federal grant to establish a broadband network, McMahan said he became excited.

Oconee's $14.3 million broadband project promised to install a 260-mile fiber optic trunk line that would make it financially feasible for "Final Mile" Internet service providers to connect homes and businesses in rural areas with fast-speed services.



FILE PHOTO

Different segments of the community are coming out in support of the beleaguered broadband project in Oconee County.

In recent weeks, though, a series of events threatened to derail the broadband project.

First, state legislation strongly lobbied for by AT&T, would add many layers of regulation upon government-owned broadband initiatives.

Second, the contractor chosen by Oconee to place the fiber optic network in the ground for about $8.2 million has of yet to secure 100 percent performance bonding for the job.

To top it off, until recently, Oconee officials have heard almost exclusively from critics loudly opposed to the project.

Some have called it the fiber optic project to nowhere. Others argued the county should not be competing with private providers.

SEE **SUPPORT**, PAGE **A5**

SUPPORT: 'I hope this project can move forward in Oconee'

FROM PAGE A1

McMahan said that when he read in the newspaper that Oconee was close to giving up on the project and returning the broadband grant back to the federal government, he decided to visit the County Administrator's office in Pine Street.

Although County Administrator Scott Moulder was not in the office, McMahan was able to speak with an assistant. He at least got the opportunity to express his support for a project that would benefit residents in sparsely populated areas with little hope of getting broadband service from AT&T or any other provider.

At the County Council meeting last week, others spoke on behalf of the broadband project.

Van Miller, the Oconee County Chamber of Commerce Board chairman, said the broadband initiative would benefit the business community and be an attractive economic development tool for the county.

School Superintendent Mike Lucas said that only about a third of parents are reviewing students' grades and attendance on the Internet. He said less than half have signed up for e-mail alerts.

"I hope this project can move forward in Oconee County," Lucas said. "It will be beneficial to our students and provide more parents with an opportunity to take advantage of these communication tools via the Internet."

John Adams, an Oconee County Public Library Board member, said he and members of his community in Mountain Rest have fought an unsuccessful public relations campaign to get "customary services" from AT&T since 2007.

Adams said his community is still denied customary services from AT&T.

Supporters of the county's broadband project got a little bit of good news.

Moulder said following last week's council meeting that "it appears a little more promising that the project will continue."

Moulder said he would likely have more to say on the project at the May 17 council meeting.

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