Council seeks to provide broadband to rural areas

BY NORMAN CANNADA
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WALHALLA — Donnie McMahan told Oconee County Council members that while the lines for the county's new broadband system are within 300 feet of his Mountain Rest home, he does not expect to benefit from the service.

"In my opinion, I will never have the opportunity to be connected up to this service because those last-mile providers will not cost-justify connecting up a customer every mile or two miles," McMahan told council members at their meeting Tuesday night. "I feel there is an opportunity in negotiating contracts with those service providers that it could be included in the contract that somehow they are required to provide the service to all rural residents. Businesses have to have an incentive to provide service."

The question of efforts the council will make to get Internet service providers (ISPs) to extend service to rural areas came up as the county approved first reading of an ordinance to allow County Administrator Scott Moulder to negotiate with individual companies for pricing of the service. The ordinance was approved Tuesday on first reading and will require two more readings before

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final approval is expected in January.

Moulder said the ordinance will allow him to offer "incentives" to businesses who are willing to offer the broadband service in rural areas of the county.

"Part of the ability under this type of format is that we will have the ability to provide to them a lower monthly cost as an incentive," Moulder said of companies that may be interested in serving rural areas. "We want to look at whether we can offer credits or incentives for companies willing to extend and provide service into the rural portions of the community. Can we make it more cost-feasible for them?"

Councilman Paul Corbeil said providing the broadband service to the rural areas was "clearly our intent" when the council began the project, paid for in part by a $9.6 million federal grant.

"Legally, I don't believe we can force anyone to provide last-mile service," Corbeil said, adding that the guidelines are in place to provide incentives for service "to as many people as possible."

Council Chairman Joel Thrift added that "this council would like to see availability of this service to the rural areas."

"We're going to do all within our power — legal power — to ensure that local residents will have access, but you can only go so far," Thrift said.

ncannada@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6684
Follow on Twitter @NormCannada