Crews rush Oconee broadband work

95-mile first phase heads into home stretch

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — The earth-digging equipment and rolls of fiber- optic conduit associated with the Oconee Focus broadband project that's been spotted throughout the county finally made its presence felt on South Pine Street this week.

Crews were seen putting plastic conduit in the ground in front of the County Administrative Offices and the School District of Oconee County headquarters.

Oconee Focus project manager Kim Wilbanks said the first phase of the project is now approximately 90 percent complete, and that workers have begun stringing fiber optic through the conduits in some areas.

"We've been getting different shipments of fiber," Wilbanks said. "We should have another shipment in January."

The 95-mile first phase of the $14.3 million broadband project is to be completed by the end of February.

When the first phase is complete, Wilbanks said that some 70 to 80 community anchor institutions — including schools, libraries, public safety agencies and churches used as emergency shelters — will be equipped with high-speed broadband capacity. When the three phases of the 270-mile broadband network are complete, a total of 147 anchor institutions will be connected.

Wilbanks said some anchor institutions likely would not be tied into the network until the third phase of the project is finished.

Oconee is paying Network working seven days a week in an effort to complete the job on schedule.

The Oconee Focus project got off the ground thanks to a $9.6 million federal grant awarded to Oconee in August 2010. Matching funds required from the county will bring the total cost of the project to more than $14 million.

Oconee got the grant on its proposal to build a fiber-optic middle-mile network to serve community anchor institutions in the rural parts of the county and connect with high-speed networks across the state.

The goal of county officials is to use the broadband network to improve the area's attractiveness to employers, promote public safety and health, and enhance educational opportunities by enabling distance learning, video conferencing and remote research.

Oconee Focus has been partnering with Clemson University to connect with networks across the state and beyond.

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Crews and equipment working on the Oconee Focus broadband project took over parts of the county government center on Pine Street in Walhalla on Friday. The 95-mile first phase of the project is heading into the home stretch.