Fiber installation to begin in September

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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SENECA — The head of a company that won a $2.7 million contract for the first phase of Oconee County's broadband project expects ground-drilling work to install fiber-optic cabling to begin in late September.

Brad Cunningham, chief executive officer of Network Controls & Electric of Greer, S.C., said Tuesday his company would start prep work immediately.

Cunningham said prep work includes selection of a project manager, site surveying and placing a general order to have all the resources needed for the project.

Network Controls is required to complete installing fiber for the first 95 miles of Oconee's 270-mile broadband network in February. Cunningham said down time from bad weather was taken into account in formulating a timetable.

Cunningham said Network Controls would subcontract an Oconee company, Jet Commercial, to do the installation work. He said Jet has done work in the past for Oconee.

Jason Tannery, president of Jet Commercial, 15437 Wells Highway, did not return The Journal's call Tuesday.

Mike Powell, Oconee's Information Technology director, said the initial 95 miles includes the Seneca-Walhalla-Westminster triangle and likely would begin on the Clemson to Seneca route on U.S. 123.

Powell said the first stage of the project also was designed to take in as many so-called "anchor institutions" as possible — a total of 147 of them — including every public school in the county, libraries, fire stations, search and rescue posts and churches used as shelters during emergencies. These anchor institutions will be linked to the network at no cost.

Councilman Paul Corbeil said Tuesday that even with the most conservative projections, the project would make money from the get-go and be able to repay the county's start-up costs in four years.

Powell said Internet service providers and businesses have signed letters of intent to pay the county for use of its middle-mile (or trunk) broadband network.

"All they are waiting for to sign contracts is to see the fiber going in the ground," Powell said.

Cunningham said once the fiber is in the ground Oconee's network would appreciate in value to the tune of three, four or more dollars for each dollar invested. He said the network is attractive to companies looking to expand services, but unable to finance the start-up costs.

The project's $14.6 million cost is mostly underwritten by a $9.6 million federal grant issued a year ago.

All the grant money for the project must be used by Aug. 18, 2013.

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