Fiber optics network to generate 'millions'

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Oconee County's Information Technology (IT) Director Mike Powel describes the frantic last-minute efforts made this spring by county employees to apply on time for a federal broadband grant as a "Hail Mary pass."

Powell had the chance Wednesday to tell members of the Oconee County Infrastructure Advisory Commission that the desperation pass scored a touchdown that likely will generate millions of dollars annually for Oconee County.

Bob Winchester, director of the Oconee Joint Regional Sewer Authority, chairs the Infrastructure Advisory Commission (IAC). He sat next to Powell, who was invited to give a PowerPoint presentation of Oconee's excursion into the broadband business.

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owner, Technology Solutions

Powell used a water main analogy to describe how Oconee's "backbone" or "Middle Mile" trunk line of fiber optics infrastructure will catapult the county into the future of super-speed information technology.

"You need a big trunk to push thousands of gallons of water to homes," Powell said.

He said the fiber optics trunk line would do the same with broadband capacity that would cover almost the entire county.

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Instead of water, sewer and electricity, which have been the predominant infrastructure concerns in Oconee, soon — in the span of just three years — the county could be competing with the likes of Silicon Valley, Powell said

Powell said he's been getting daily proposals from businesses wanting a piece of the trunk.

"Smaller data companies have contacted us," Powell said. "We're holding out for the bigger guys."

Powell and those consulting him on the construction of a fiber optics communications network in Oconee County are giddy about the county's future prospects.

Richard Ellison, owner of Technology Solutions, Inc. in Seneca, is one of those consultants. He accompanied Powell to the IAC broadband presentation.

Ellison tried to put into words what the $14.3 million fiber optics project is going to do for Oconee.

"It brings opportunities to this county that we haven't figured out yet," Ellison said.

Ellison said that the possibility of having data centers establish in Oconee is no longer a far-fetched dream.

"We're talking to them," he said. "It makes us competitive with anyone. It'll make it easier to get companies to come here."

Under the terms of the $9.6 million federal grant, Oconee County must own the fiber optics network for at least 10 years.

Powell said most of the $4.7 million needed by the county to match the federal grant would come from business opportunities.

Those business opportunities include contracts with Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that will go the "Last Mile" from the trunk to the home to give the customer super-fast broadband services.

In theory, the network will drive up competition among ISPs looking to grab a share of a new broad base of customers, and thereby drive consumer costs down.

The project calls for 245 miles of underground fiber optics cable to be funneled underground in concentric circles expanding out from around a triangle between Seneca, Walhalla and Westminster.

Where currently only 30.3 percent of Oconee residents have access to terrestrial broadband, the new network would cover more than 90 percent of the county.

In other words, those that have not would finally get in the game and those that do have would get a better product.

Getting the broadband grant, Powell predicts, is a "game-changer" for Oconee County.

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