# Giddy geeks!

## High-tech users excited by broadband potential

BY BRETT MCLAUGHLIN
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — The $15 million high-tech project for which Oconee County won two-thirds federal funding on Wednesday represents the most aggressive public-private partnership in county history.

Known as Oconee FOCUS (Fiber Optics Creating Unified Solutions), the partnership plans to build a fiber-optic network to service the rural parts of the county and connect with high-speed networks across the state.

The grant application that was awarded provides $9.6 million in federal stimulus funding. That money, and a local match of $4.5 million, will be used to construct a 245-mile fiber-optic network that will provide faster broadband speeds and thus improve Oconee County's attractiveness to new and existing employers.

Although Oconee County does not currently own or operate a telecommunications network, Appalachian Council of Governments spokesperson Olivia Harris said the public-private partnership created for the project involves community leaders with the skills necessary to manage a broadband network project.

County Administrator Scott Moulder said the first $1 million in matching funds would come from county reserves. The partnership, he said, would operate as an enterprise account with revenues derived by the system used to fulfill the remainder of Oconee's match obligation.

Oconee County School District officials endorsed the initiative, which also calls for enhanced distance learning, video conferencing and remote research capabilities that will improve educational opportunities for students of all ages.

"Everything we do is done on the Internet," Superintendent Michael Lucas said, adding that Wednesday was a great day for Oconee County. "I understand we will be able to piggyback on this system and have faster access. Our tech people are very excited."

Lucas said parents, regardless of where they live, will be able to access the school district to check on student attendance, grades and teacher information.

By subscribing to a local Internet service provider, approximately 27,800 households and 2,400 businesses could have access to the Oconee network.

Wednesday's federal investments totaled $1.8 billion and are part of a nearly $7 billion Recovery Act initiative that was announced by the Obama administration in March. Oconee filed its grant application shortly thereafter.

brett@dailyjm.com | (864) 882-6397