Hurdles remain for Oconee broadband

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
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SENECA — When Oconee County released the names and contact information of the Internet service providers who would be connecting customers to its broadband middle mile network at the end of April, Tom Wood of Salem said he called the six providers on the list the very next day.

Wood said the ISPs were caught off guard by his call and did not know the county had released their information.

"All six had no idea of what to do except call the county," Wood said.

Wood let a couple of months pass, and in July, called the ISPs again. One provider said it could give Wood a quote for connection in a week.

"Never heard back from him," Wood said.

The Journal recently contacted and talked to most of the Internet service providers — who now are seven in number — doing business with Oconee's $15 million broadband network called FOCUS, an acronym for Fiber Optics Creating Unified Solutions. A big chunk of the funding for the project came from a $9.6 million federal grant made available through the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications Information Administration (NTIA).

The ISPs had mixed views about their experience working with the county.

Some officials expressed concerns

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'farm it out'

those things are proprietary."

A proposal from Loggins to help begin clearing hurdles in his work is scheduled to go before the county's Board of Zoning Appeals on Aug. 26.

HURDLES: County trying to

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with the manner in which the county was handling its broadband business, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Others said on the record that progress is being made, but pointed out more time is needed to improve delivery of services.

The prevalent concerns of those speaking on the condition of anonymity are related to pricing and requests for quotes from the county.

"I get a lot of quotes from individuals, and I usually have to explain to them that I don't know what the cost will be to install it," a provider said.

Providers say they get information from a customer that they turn over to the county and wait to get a quote. Some say a uniform pricing method should be put in place that makes clear how much the installation will cost based on the distance the customer is from a connection box.

"It's got to be done in a way so that everybody is playing on the same field," one provider said. "That to me is the biggest problem they have."

Another provider said he's troubled by comments he's heard about the county wanting to be out of the broadband business, which raises concerns about who's going to control the network and whether the rules will change.

Several said installation costs are too high for many people, which scares away many prospective customers.

County administrator Scott Moulder declined to comment when asked about the providers' concerns.

Oconee County Council chairman Joel Thrift reiterated that the county does not want to be in the broadband business.

"We don't have the capabilities of doing all that," Thrift said. "What we're trying to do is farm it out."

Scott Loggins, president of OneTone Telecom Inc. in Seneca, said he is approaching 100 customers on the county's network. He said the county's part was to provide the trunk line of fiber, and it will be up to the last-mile providers to find cost-effective ways of connecting customers.

"We are working on multiple solutions with the county," Loggins said. "We're exploring every possibility that can be explored, and we're going to find a cost-effective way to deliver those services to those areas. It's just going to take some time."

Loggins said the county awarded his company a permit to deploy the first wireless broadband site and has lined up a hearing before planning officials for more wireless sites.

"That we're doing it wireless is not a secret. We've deployed to subdivisions on Highway 11," Loggins said. "We're doing it already, but which areas we're deploying to next and what our plans are and what technology,

'In today's world, it's increasingly hard to sell a million-dollar home and then not have Internet.'

Andy Lee
Lake Keowee Real Estate owner

Fred Machado, owner of M2P Net, LLC, said he's entered into an agreement with Oconee to buy dark fiber from the county. Dark fiber is basically unused fiber, and that would give Machado's company the capacity to sell to end-users.

"I'm working with the county," Machado said. "There's been some difficulties getting connections in the system running just because of the complexity of what we're doing. ... The county has been good to work with, and they've done what they told me they're going to do. I don't have any complaints. It's a lengthy process."

Andy Lee of Lake Keowee Real Estate in Seneca said offering high-speed Internet to homes around the lake is essential.

"In today's world, it is increasingly hard to sell a million-dollar home and then not have Internet," Lee said. "What we in Oconee County need to understand is that basic utilities are no longer water and power. They are water, power and Internet. That's the world that we live in today."

carlos@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6686
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