Moulder hopes broadband in place

BY NORMAN CANNADA
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Scott Moulder
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WALHALLA — While a $15 million grant project to have countywide broadband Internet service is running behind projected timelines, Oconee Administrator Scott Moulder said he expects the project to be operational by the end of the year.

"I am hopeful that by the end of this calendar year this system will be fully operational with some bugs possibly that we may still have to work through," Moulder said. "I still feel confident this project is going to be successful and it's going to be what we anticipated it was going to be. I think it's going to pay huge benefits beyond our belief at the potential we've got."

Moulder and other officials had originally said the project would be completed this summer and then later in September. He said the service should be completed and ready within the next few weeks with a temporary pricing structure set up to allow Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to begin offering the service to customers. Three ISPs have already signed contracts to use the new service once it is up and running. He declined to name the companies, citing a non-disclosure agreement.

"Our main focus right now is to get this thing completed. That's the first priority," Moulder said. "The second priority is to get a viable pricing structure. It's not a viable business model until you have a pricing structure you can start selling service with. We're hoping to have the pricing levels ready to start selling to ISPs in the next couple of weeks. We have arranged to where we can go ahead and begin temporary pricing structure under the understanding that it is possible that it will change depending on council's final approval of the structure. Everybody is in such a hurry that we wanted to get this thing going and then we will have to make modifications that are necessary once council approves it."

The project has been funded largely by a federal grant, with the county providing about $3.8 million in matching funds and a little more than $1 million in in-kind support. Moulder said he remains confident the matching money will be repaid to the county.

"I think we were a little overly optimistic in the beginning about the timeframe it would take to start generating the revenue," he said. "I had hoped to be generating enough revenue to begin paying that back by now, but again we haven't even begun selling the service to the ISPs yet. I have some concerns about when the taxpayer money will be paid back. Do I feel confident it will? Absolutely."

He added that the work has been daunting for the three staff members who have been assigned to the project.

"I've got three staff members for the last three and a half years who have been building this network," Moulder said. "That's not an easy task for three people. Most of these other agencies, they've got 20-30. The program managers have pretty much ridiculed us for only having three people do this, but we're trying to do it as efficiently as we can and manage it with as few staff as possible."

He added that even though the project is seen as behind, Oconee County is actually ahead of others in the country.

"Many of the projects that got money through this program are asking for extensions, and we never did," Moulder said. "From what we've been hearing, we are one of the models for how the program should be managed within the framework of the grant. It's a significant endeavor to within a three-year period design, fund, create, install and establish a multi-million dollar network and telecommunication process. It takes time.

"Now we're in the final phases — we've been in the final phases for quite some time," he added. "When you're trying to complete the proper programming and engineering of the communications center throughout the county, you've got to get it right, so it will take a little bit of time."

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