Oconee County holds off on broadband contracts

Wants pricing study completed first

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WALHALLA — Oconee County won't announce any contracts for the use of its startup broadband network until it has completed a pricing analysis.

Information Technology Director Mike Powell said the county is working with a consultant that has done work for Clemson University to determine how much to charge companies interested in using Oconee's "middle-mile" fiber network.

Powell said the county hasn't signed any agreements and won't do so until it has reviewed the consultant's rates study.

The study is almost completed and should be ready soon, Powell indicated.

"We want to give fair pricing," Powell said. "We're investing time and energy to make sure we do the right things."

The Oconee County Procurement Office this week posted a request for proposals to contract a system operator for the broadband project.

The system operator selected would be expected to have staff available around the clock at Network Operation Centers in Seneca, Walhalla and Westminster for technical support and respond in person to any of the three NOC locations.

According to the RFP, the county intends to contract with the system operator for approximately two years, or until construction of the network is completed, which is estimated to be August 2013.

Oconee was awarded a grant for $9.6 million last year through the Recovery Act funded Broadband Technology Opportunity Program to help establish a middle-mile network, which is the most capital-intensive part of establishing and extending broadband access.

By providing the network, Oconee officials expect Internet Service Providers to pay for its use so that they can make the final connections to provide homes and businesses with Internet services.

Development of the network was hampered when the first fiber-installation contract awarded by the county fell through when the contractor was unable to bond the project.

Oconee awarded a $2.7 million contract to a company out of Greer to install fiber on the first 95 miles of the proposed 270-mile network. The county estimates it would cost more than $14 million to complete the network.

The project also was delayed by state legislation pushed by AT&T that threatened to paralyze Oconee's project with government regulation. The bill did not make it out of committee for a final vote.

Powell said the contractor is making progress getting the conduit in the ground for the fiber. He said the first phase would get the core of the network up and running.

The first phase would establish a ring tying Seneca, Walhalla and Westminster, and connect dozens of public facilities, including schools, hospitals, libraries, emergency evacuation shelters and public safety operations.

Powell said the second phase of the project should get under way before the first phase is completed by mid-February.

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FILE PHOTO

Workers are installing fiber conduit in the ground as part of the first phase of Oconee's $14.3 million broadband project. Oconee won't announce any deals for the use of its network until a rates study is completed.