Oconee County playing catch-up on broadband

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Oconee officials appear ready to invest in the county's telecommunication future by giving the Information Technology (IT) Department the go-ahead to apply for a federal matching-grant opportunity that could expand and modernize broadband accessibility countywide.

Oconee County Council, at a special meeting this week, acknowledged the need to upgrade its broadband capacity and seems determined to pony-up a match of 20 percent of the grant if for no other reason than to compete with other areas in attracting new businesses to Oconee.

'We're behind the eight ball.'

Reg Dexter
Oconee Council Chairman

Council Chairman Reg Dexter said he recently learned firsthand at an economic development forum how businesses looking to locate in an area are checking off broadband availability as a key requirement to keep a county in the running as a possible location site.

"Oconee doesn't have any... we're behind the eight ball," Dexter said, adding that some companies won't give an area a second look if it lacks broadband capabilities.

Oconee's IT Director Mike Powell and Richard Ellison, CEO of Technology Solutions in Seneca, said the county is under the gun to get the application in before a March 15 deadline. That's why council held the special meeting Wednesday, because it doesn't meet in regular session again until March 16, or after the deadline to apply for

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the grant.

The grant is made available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in an effort to expand broadband to rural areas. Powell said Vice President Joe Biden recently presented Lumpkin, Ga. $33 million through the broadband grant program.

Council Vice Chairman Joel Thrift said he's all in favor of giving children that live in rural parts of the county the opportunity to expand their education by having the kind of Internet access and service available in urban areas, but would like to know what the estimated cost would be.

Powell said a broadband loop connecting Seneca, Walhalla and Westminster would cost in the neighborhood of $900,000. That cost would increase to the extent that broadband service is expanded outside the loop to reach the outermost areas of the county such as Long Creek and Mountain Rest.

Ellison said the demand for broadband service is evident in Oconee by the increased demand to use computers at Oconee County libraries that now are equipped with broadband high-speed Internet capacity. He said a growing number of people bring their laptops to the library because all branches have Wi-Fi access.

"You'd be surprised at the number of people I see parked in their cars outside the Salem and Walhalla libraries with their laptops," Ellison said after Wednesday's meeting. "Some of them just want to check their e-mail before they go home."

Although the minimum amount that could be applied for in the broadband grant program is $5 million, Powell said counties could sign a waiver to request a lesser amount without it being counted against them.

The competition will be hot for these grants, but Ellison and Powell are hopeful Oconee wins out and is able to step into the high-tech future.

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Oconee County hopes to capture federal funds to begin the process of providing county-wide broadband access.