

# Oconee broadband project speeds up

## Engineering and permitting services advertised

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WALHALLA — Once given up for dead, Oconee County's controversial broadband project is very much alive.

Oconee's Procurement Office posted an Invitation to Bid for qualified contractors interested in providing engineering and permitting services for the \$14.3 million project.

County officials are capitalizing on a \$9.6 million federal grant awarded last year to establish their proposed 270-mile broadband network.

However, officials came close to pulling the plug on the project. Early missteps in hiring a contractor to install the fiber stalled the project for months.

On top of that, a state bill threatened to undermine the project's viability and nearly doomed the initiative before it could get off the ground.

The project also has had its share of critics who think that hidden costs would drive the county's costs beyond

\$20 million.

The ITB just put out for engineering and permitting services is the second procurement posting related to the broadband project in the past three weeks.

Oconee issued a request for proposals on June 16 to find an installation contractor for the first phase of the project. The deadline for submitting bids is July 14.

The installation contractor selected would not be eligible to also compete for engineering and permitting services.

Competitive sealed bids in response to the ITB will be opened July 26.

The ITB is seeking a contractor "to create construction drawings for the purpose of permitting" about 170 miles of the broadband network.

Oconee's broadband network would be designed to cover 90 percent of the county and interconnect with adjacent cities and states.

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## PROJECT: Plug almost pulled

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The broadband networks' fiber optic rings would pass through Seneca, Walhalla, Westminster, West Union and Salem, according to background offered in the ITB. Also benefiting from the network would be the communities of Long Creek, Mountain Rest, Townville, Oakway, Fair Play and Keowee.

By establishing its broadband trunk line, Oconee would eliminate start-up infrastructure costs to so-called final mile Internet service providers. In theory, the savings would be passed down in the form of more affordable high-speed Internet services to consumers.

Oconee's network would encompass an estimated 25,200 households and 2,230 businesses.

County Council has scheduled a special meeting Aug. 8 to award the first phase of fiber installation.