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Oconee broadband to be boon for school

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WALHALLA — As state funds for school technology shrink, the more excited the head of technology at the School District of Oconee County becomes with the prospects of a countywide $14 million broadband project.

Joe Rukat calls the nearly $10 million federal grant Oconee received last year for broadband as one of the most significant developments since he became technology director for county schools in 1983.

"I'm excited about it," Rukat said Wednesday. "This will be a wonderful project."

As part of the requirements for receiving the federal money, Oconee has to connect its 24 K-12 public schools to a proposed 270-mile broadband network.

Rukat said it's a win-win situation for the county and the state. He said that when county schools link up to Oconee's network, it would free the state from funding technology at county schools.

Under the K-12 Technology Initiative started in 1996, state government helps to fund the Internet services provided to all 85 K-12 school districts and 143 branch libraries in South Carolina.

South Carolina moved to the head of the class in technology when it launched the initiative 15 years ago, but has been losing ground steadily over the years because of shrinking state revenues and budget cuts.

The decline in school technology is referenced in the most recent K-12 Initiative progress report published in 2009.

"Unfortunately, however, during the last decade the provision of funding has fallen behind the rapidly expanding need for connection bandwidth to enable effective and efficient learning in the digital age," the report states.

Rukat said Oconee's broadband network would provide local schools with a minimum of 1 gig capacity that would dwarf present capabilities, even with an upgrade in August that would cost the county $500 a month.

Rukat said the local school district would pay nothing to almost minimal with the county's broadband system.

"The educational benefits would be phenomenal," he said.

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