Oconee gets $9.6M for broadband

Grant part of federal Recovery Act initiative

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Oconee County has scored a high-tech victory with a $9.6 million price tag.

County officials celebrated Wednesday when Oconee's application was among 94 Economic Recovery Act broadband projects for which funding was announced by Vice President Joe Biden.

The investments in high-speed Internet infrastructure in 37 states will, according to Biden's office, "help bridge the technological divide in communities that are being left in the 20th century economy and support improvements in education, health care and public safety."

Wednesday's investments total $1.8 billion and are part of a nearly $7 billion Recovery Act initiative that was announced by the Obama administration in March and that prompted Oconee to file a $15 million grant application shortly thereafter.

According to the grant announcement, the funds will allow Oconee to offer affordable middle-mile broadband service. The project plans to directly connect as many as 150 community institutions to broadband, impacting 66,700 people and 2,400 businesses.

Oconee County will have to match 20 percent of the award or nearly $2 million. County Council Chairman Reg Dexter said Wednesday he would be looking into how the county can meet that

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obligation.

When County Council cleared the grant application in March, Dexter said 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.

Richard Ellison, CEO of Technology Solutions in Seneca, told the council at the time that 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.

Oconee's IT Department Director Mike Powell estimated in March that 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.

Oconee's application gained approval despite a decision by Gov. Mark Sanford not to endorse the effort. Ironically, North Carolina Gov. Bev Perdue, who said Oconee's gain would also benefit the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina, backed the bid. Oconee Medical Center, the School District of Oconee County and U.S. Rep. Gresham Barrett endorsed the local grant.

Powell collaborated with individuals, groups, businesses and organizations to determine what was needed in Oconee.

A core objective of the national program is to have 100 million homes across the United States have download speeds of 100 megabits per second and actual upload speeds of 50 Mbps in the next 10 years. Oconee averages 1 Mbps and about 30 percent of households don't have any kind of broadband service at all, according to an assessment study released last year.

"Today's investment in broadband technology will create jobs across the country and expand opportunities for millions of Americans and American companies. In addition to bringing 21st century infrastructure to underserved communities and rural areas, these investments will begin to harness the power of broadband to improve education, health care and public safety," Biden said Wednesday.