Oconee makes progress on broadband

80 miles of network might be deployed before 2011 ends

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WALHALLA — Oconee County made significant third-quarter progress with its broadband project, but is still playing catch-up after getting off to a slow start.

The county's third-quarter report tells federal overseers that installation of approximately 30 miles of conduit and the delivery of 30 miles of fiber with a variety of counts have been accomplished.

Other significant milestones include the engineering of 156 miles by GeoVision, a firm hired by Oconee to plan the bulk of the 270-mile broadband network.

Project Manager Kim Wilbanks also noted the hiring of a systems operator and the securing of a permit for the route from the National Forestry Service after ensuring that an endangered flower — the Smooth Cone Flower — would not be disturbed.

Oconee must submit quarterly performance progress reports to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to account for a $9.6 million broadband infrastructure grant.

The three-month activity report is for the period ending Sept. 30, and was submitted by Wilbanks on Nov. 21.

Oconee still faces challenges going forward, including the purchase of fiber.



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Oconee's third-quarter broadband project report indicates there has been 30 miles of fiber conduit installed during the 95-mile first phase. Oconee still is playing catch-up on its $14.3 million project.

"We hope to have large shipments in the beginning of 2012," Wilbanks wrote.

Looking ahead to the last quarter of 2011, Oconee projects that the phase of the project that encompasses 95 miles would be 85 percent complete.

Other expected milestones before the year ends are getting equipment ordered and shipped, and getting at least two agreements signed with wholesalers or last-mile providers.

The report also indicates that by the end of the next quarter the county expects to release and likely award construction contracts for phase two of the project, begin working on a Request for Proposals for phase three and have the Seneca network operation center up and running.

Wilbanks reports that the county should have about 80 miles of the network deployed by the end of the fourth quarter, and that some seven Community Anchor Institutions — such as schools, fire stations and emergency shelter facilities — would be connected and served, the report added.

Wilbanks added that a few public sessions would be scheduled to explain broadband and address questions being submitted to www.oconeefocus.com — the county's website updating the status of the broadband project.

To date, Oconee has spent just more than $936,000 on the project, including almost $523,000 in federal funds and about $414,000 in matching funds.

The total cost of the project is expected to exceed $14 million.

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