Oconee's broadband to be 'self-sustaining'

Work could begin in two weeks to build the system in segments

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Oconee County's plan is to build its far-reaching fiber optics communications network in segments and pay for it as it grows.

County Administrator Scott Moulder said Tuesday that Oconee would draw down on a $9.6 million federal broadband grant on a reimbursable basis as the fiber optics network takes shape.

Officials also are confident that as the network is built in stages that revenue generated from businesses accessing the system will pay for ongoing expenditures, including a grant match of approximately $4.7 million.

Construction of the planned 245-mile fiber network would allow local Internet service providers to bring broadband speeds of 10 megabytes per second and 10 gigabytes per second.

A study published last year on Oconee's broadband needs found that most local households and businesses don't have high-speed Internet service, and those that do have average speeds of 1.5 to 6 MB. Just 1 GB is about 200 times faster than the typical 5 MB high-speed Internet connections in the United States.

Joe Newton, deputy director at the Appalachian Council of Governments, which helped provide the funding for the broadband study in Oconee, said the planned fiber optic net-

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work is important for the county's future economic development opportunities.

"It's a great thing for Oconee," Newton said Tuesday. "Aside from the grant, it boosts Oconee to the industrial communication age."

ACOG is one of eight broadband project partners that Oconee listed in its federal grant application. Other partners include Seneca, Walhalla, Westminster, Clemson University, Oconee Medical Center, Beaverdam Baptist Association and the American Red Cross.

Kim Wilbanks, who helped write the grant, said installation of the fiber optic network could begin as early as mid-September. She said the entire project should be completed in three years.

Wilbanks said federal stimulus money would pay 68 percent of the $14.3 million broadband project, while the county would pay the remaining 32 percent of the total cost through in-kind services and revenue generated through sales of services.

"The network will be a self-sustaining utility," Wilbanks said.

carlos@dailyjm.com | (864) 973-6685