Will broadband project make it to the mountains?

Oconee County officials say it will

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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LONG CREEK — A top executive with Wildwater Adventure Centers said the business would get a big boost from Oconee's broadband project when and if it makes it to the mountains.

Wildwater, in Long Creek, is a mecca for rafting enthusiasts who get their thrills paddling on the Chattooga Wild & Scenic River.

The Long Creek Wildwater offices is the main link to other adventure centers — Ocoee River in Ducktown, Tenn,, just north of the Georgia border, Nantahala River in North Carolina and Pigeon River close to the Great Smoky

Jack Wise, Wildwater's chief executive officer, said the adventure centers combine to generate gross revenues of $5 million annually.

Wise said he's been following the county's broadband project since Oconee officials announced it had been awarded a $9.6 million federal grant to establish a fiber-optic network.

The 270-mile project is expected to cost almost $15 million to complete.

"It would be great if the fiber optic made it up here," Wise said.

The Wildwater office communicates online with a T1 line connection that affords 1.5 mg of data. An additional 1.5 mg is being added this week.

Oconee Fire Chief Charlie King said it would be critical to have connectivity at the Long Creek and Mountain Rest fire stations. He said only a few fire stations in the county have Internet service.

So far, King said fiber has been brought to the fire stations in Westminster, West Union and South Union.

He said Emergency Services has identified facilities that should be connected to improve the county's emergency network.

"We could have centralized data management and not rely on paper reports once we're connected," King said. "It'll make a huge difference."

Oconee recently awarded a $3.4 million contract for phase two of the broadband project to Network Controls of Greer, which also completed phase one at a cost of $2.7 million.

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"It's not up to today's standards," Wise said.

Wildwater gets its Internet service from Windstream, Wise said. Earlier this year the company was quoted a price of $550,000 to get 10 mg broadband connection to the business.

When the workday is complete, Wise commutes to his home in Mountain Rest.

There's a trade off for working and living in the mountains. Wise said he's had to resign himself to not having many of the telecommunication basics that people living in the city take for granted.

"Having cell phone service in my house would be nice," Wise said.

Chanda Morrison of Mountain Rest also laments not having Internet access.

"It's almost a daily necessity," Morrison said of the service. "Many people in Long Creek and Mountain Rest literally do not have access to the Internet and have not been successful in getting it via the limited options."

Morrison said she fears that the county will run out of money before they see fiber optics near them.

Kim Wilbanks, Oconee's broadband project manager, said Tuesday that fiber optics would reach the fire stations in Long Creek and Mountain Rest by the end of phase two and the early stages of phase three by the end of the year.

Wilbanks said the rocky terrain leading to the two mountain fire stations is a concern, and could delay the work.

"Fiber will be installed in certain areas of Long Creek and Mountain Rest in phase two," she said. "The remaining areas will be in phase three.



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Contractors working on Oconee's broadband network are transitioning into the second phase of the project. Mountain residents and businesses are hoping money does not dry up on the almost $15 million project until fiber reaches them.