Work begins on broadband network

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Work quietly is under way on Oconee County's $14.6 million broadband project that's been delayed for months.

County Administrator Scott Moulder told The Journal on Tuesday that the project was completely bonded late last week to allow work to begin on the first phase of the 270-mile network.

The bulk of the project is being funded through a $9.6 million federal grant awarded to Oconee last year.

"They were out marking ground and getting ready to start digging," Moulder said.

Oconee County Council awarded a $2.7 million contract to Networks Control & Electric of Greer on Aug. 8. The contractor is in charge of installing fiber-optic cable through the first 95 miles.

Networks Control is subcontracting with Jet Commercial, a company on Wells Highway in Oconee County.

Moulder said both companies were 100 percent bonded as required in the contract to begin the project.

Oconee thought it had a deal worked out with another company to install fiber-optic cable for the entire 270-mile network at a cost of $8.2 million. However, that deal fell through when Southern Pipeline & Utility of Georgia could not get full bonding.

After waiting for weeks on Southern Pipeline to get bonding, Oconee officials got tired of waiting and decided to re-bid the project in stages.

Information Technology Director Mike Powell said the county got double protection in requiring bonding from the contractor and subcontractor.

The bonding approval became more relevant after county watchdogs recently raised concerns about Jet Commercial having two federal tax liens hanging over it.

Jet Commercial owner Jason Tannery called the tax liens, which total more than $18,000, "a part of doing business" in a bad economy.

"It's our business to take care of it," Tannery said of the liens.

Tannery said his company does business throughout South Carolina and in other states, and is looking forward to working on the broadband project.

Powell said Network Controls and Jet Commercial are going "above and beyond" in using techniques to verify lines in the ground put in by other utilities and mark the actual footage.

Powell said the county is permitted by the state Department of Transportation on Highway 24 in the southern end of the county (where work has begun), as well as highways 11 and 183 in Walhalla.

"DOT is working closely with us and we appreciate the help," Powell said.

The network promises to link schools, fire stations and public safety agencies to the broadband network at no cost, and provide essential infrastructure in underserved areas. Oconee expects to pay for its costs in the project by charging a fee to Internet Service Providers competing to make final connections to homes and businesses to the county's network.

Officials are hopeful that the competition will drive prices down to make broadband service more affordable.

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