

USDA awards \$7.5M loan for Oconee County internet project

BY NORM CANNADA
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Efforts to bring broadband internet service to more rural areas in Oconee County got a boost Thursday — a \$7.5 million boost in federal money.

U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Deputy Under Secretary Bette Brand announced a \$7.5 million loan to One Tone Telecommunications “to deploy high-speed internet” in South Carolina. The loan carries a 2 percent interest rate over 16 years, according to USDA Rural Development spokeswoman Jacqueline Susmann.

One Tone is working under an agreement with Oconee County Council to provide internet service in the rural areas of the county, starting with lines the county put in with a federal grant several years ago.

One Tone officials said they are working to provide service in Oconee, as well as the Townville area at the Oconee/Anderson border.

Brand said the funds are designed



U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Deputy Under Secretary Bette Brand announces the USDA's loan to One Tone Telecommunications during an event at the Tokeena Angus Farm on Thursday.

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Bette Brand

U.S. Department of Agriculture official

to help One Tone “reach the last mile” in areas where internet service isn’t available.

“With this investment, One Tone Telecommunications can deploy high-speed internet to connect 12,938 people, 29 businesses and three educational facilities in Anderson and Oconee counties who have never had access to internet before,” Brand told a crowd at the Tokeena Angus Farm on Thursday morning. She added that 80 percent of the 21 million households without broadband infrastructure nationally are in rural areas.

“In this day and age, all of Ameri-

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Second-grader Armanee Murillo completes virtual school work at her home in Walhalla last month. The U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded a \$7.5 million loan to One Tone Telecommunications on Thursday that will help deploy high-speed internet to rural areas of the county.

LOAN: 'Broadband internet is our future'

FROM PAGE A1

ca needs a robust modern infrastructure to thrive," she said. "This is a necessity, and not an amenity."

Brand said the goal "to connect rural America" is not an easy one and compared it to efforts decades ago to bring electric service to rural areas.

"The task is daunting, but it is so important for us to keep our eyes on the long-term focus of connecting these communities," she said. "It's not going to happen overnight, but we're making progress."

One Tone president and CEO Scott Loggins and COO Mike Powell said the company has about 2,000 customers now and hopes to connect at least 7,000 more households over the next three years.

"We're going to connect thousands and thousands of people. That's our goal, and that's what we set out to do," Powell said. "We had to get infrastructure in. We had to help emergency management, so if you called 911, those calls go through. The next step is to push out toward the business owners and the residents."

Loggins said the loan program will help reach that goal.

"This USDA program is true last-mile services for residential neighborhoods and small clusters of homes in rural areas," he said. "It is primarily residentially based. We've got a pretty sound model that will allow us to continue to expand well beyond those numbers — and well beyond the

county — to neighboring counties. We've got a lot of work to do."

Oconee County Council chairman Julian Davis said expectations have been high for rural broadband service in the county for many years.

"Broadband has been a challenge from the get-go," Davis said. "It's been a challenge with the expectations that were laid out, and I don't think the county did a very good job of laying out where we

were headed with this to the citizens.

"Everybody wants it to go 100 miles an hour, but it's moving 30 miles an hour," he added. "With investments like this, I feel like it will speed it up another 20 miles an hour to where we're continuing to connect. I hope as we move forward with this investment here that it gives a big jump into this project and moves it forward. ... This is an investment that

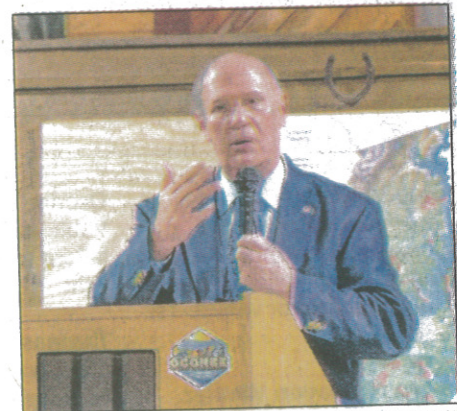
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Julian Davis
Oconee County Council chairman

I think that this project needed to get moving faster."

State Sen. Thomas Alexander called the announcement "a monumental next step."

"It's certainly another piece of the puzzle that helps us continue to expand broadband deployment to Oconee County," he said. "There's more work to be done. The fact that we can deploy \$7.5 million into that investment is huge for the number of homes and businesses that will be served. This is critical infrastructure. It's just as important as water, sewer, telecommunications and things like that. Broadband internet is our future."



PHOTOS BY SAVANNAH BLAKE | THE JOURNAL
From top, One Tone Telecommunications COO Mike Powell, Oconee County Council chairman Julian Davis and Sen. Thomas Alexander speak at an event Thursday announcing the company has received a U.S. Department of Agriculture loan to help provide broadband to rural areas.