

# 'A huge shot in the arm'

## Cooperatives partner to invest \$150M for fiber optic network

BY RILEY MORNINGSTAR  
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SENECA — Two utility cooperatives have formalized a partnership to invest \$150 million to bring fiber optic, high-speed broadband internet to Oconee County.

On Tuesday, Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative (BREC) and West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperative (WCTEL) officials announced the creation of Upcountry Fiber to help "bridge the digital divide where little to no access" for internet exists.

The initiative, broken into projects, will



SEE NETWORK, PAGE A3

cover 1,800 square miles across rural and suburban areas of Anderson, Pickens, Oconee, northern Greenville and northern Spartanburg counties across five years, according to an Upcountry Fiber news release. Blue Ridge serves 69,000 customers in Upstate South Carolina. Blue Ridge vice president of economic development and government relations Zach Hinton told The Journal the partnership was going to be a "huge deal" for Oconee.

"When you think of what we're trying to accomplish with OneTone and the county, we've got an opportunity over the next several years to impact the quality of life

of citizens of the county, particularly in the rural parts," he said. "I see this as a huge shot in the arm for Oconee County in terms of quality of life and economic development."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates "80 percent of the 24 million American households that do not have reliable, affordable high-speed internet are in rural areas."

### ASSET ORIGINS

Earlier this year, Blue Ridge and West Carolina submitted a joint letter of intent to purchase Seneca-based OneTone Telecom's fiber and broadband network assets, which includes fiber installations and electronic equipment to support the network.

Last October, Blue Ridge said it was aiming to roll out a high-speed internet pilot program this spring to begin supplying high-speed internet across its five-county service territory.

An early pilot project was completed in February in Oconee's Stillwater neighborhood, according to a news release. Some 85 of

the 130 homes in the neighborhood participated in the program, with Upcountry Fiber now planning to build out service in parts of Seneca and Central through the end of 2021.

### 'GAME-CHANGING OPPORTUNITY'

The company release also shed light on the expenses of the venture.

"Together, the cooperatives will share costs and responsibilities of the roll-out, maintenance and service for Upcountry Fiber," the release said. "BREC

will use its existing utility poles and infrastructure to build the network, while WCTEL will be responsible for connecting fiber from the poles directly to each customer's location, as well as for the equipment inside households and businesses. Upcountry Fiber will bill for these services independently." WCTEL

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**Zach Hinton**  
Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative vice president of economic development and government relations

chief executive officer Jeff Wilson said the partnership was a "game-changing opportunity" for Blue Ridge customers.

Some 27,000 people in Blue Ridge's service area were found to be "unserved or underserved" in a two-year feasibility study performed by the cooperative.

"Without access to high-speed, reliable internet communities are losing ground," Blue Ridge chief executive officer Jim Lov

inggood said. "With it, the Upstate's rural communities have a better chance to become stronger by having a more attractive economic development story, easier access to information for students to learn, educators to teach and for our neighbors to be better able to apply for jobs, have better access to health care by being able to virtually meet with their doctors, if needed."

morningstar@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6685