

Rural areas will get high-speed Internet access

Federal funds will be used to expand network into western Ohio.

By [Christopher Magan](#), Staff Writer

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COLUMBUS — A \$30 million federal stimulus award to improve high-speed Internet access could transform the way some rural schools educate students.

Western Ohio is the first region in the state to win federal stimulus funding to increase broadband access in rural counties. Earlier this month Gov. Ted Strickland announced \$30 million in funding that could bring a total of 300 jobs to 28 of the state's western counties including Greene, Miami, Preble, Warren and Clark counties.

The project, which must be completed during the next 30 months, will add 700 miles of high-capacity fiber reaching 165,000 businesses, schools and government buildings, said Amanda Wurst, spokeswoman for Gov. Strickland.

The grant was part of \$795 million in awards the Obama administration announced this month. State officials are awaiting news on two other applications for the northern and southeastern parts of Ohio hoping to win as much as \$100 million to improve Internet access there.

The proposal drafted by the Ohio Middle Mile Consortium, a partnership of private broadband provider ComNet and the Ohio Academic Resources Network, which provides state colleges internet access, calls for an expansion of the network that serves universities.

Large areas of western Ohio's rural counties have little or no high-speed Internet access, which Eric Fingerhut, chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents that oversees the state's university system, calls "the interstate highway of the 21st century."

Increased Internet access in rural communities will mean students who typically faced an hour or more commute to school could instead take online courses, said Jennifer Dietsch, Clark State Community College spokeswoman.

"Faced with an hour drive several days a week, they might opt for a different degree or no degree at all," she said.

Fingerhut believes this investment in technology will create the opportunity for future jobs. Fast Internet access is key to improving the state's education systems, he said. "It really is becoming absolutely essential component of a quality education."

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