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Broadband service to reach more residents

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With President Barack Obama announcing stimulus funding for 66 new projects across the nation on Friday intended to make broadband access to the Internet more prevalent, this area stands to benefit through a \$30 million award to Com Net, Inc., based in Wapakoneta.

Com Net's GigE Plus project will add almost 700 new miles of fiber to its high capacity network. That will help expand broadband service to GigE Plus Availability Coalition partners in 28 counties in western Ohio, including those using bright.net services.

"Com Net was founded in the early 90s by 22 of Ohio's rural independent operating companies to provide collectively what could not be accomplished individually," explained Com Net CEO Tim Berelsman. "Com Net pooled its assets with those of its owner-partners to deliver advanced services to the rural communities that they served."

While only 72 percent of Van Wert County residents currently have a computer in the home, only 64 percent have any Internet service and just 47 percent have a broadband connection, according to a recent Connect Ohio study. Broadband service provides faster speeds and allows customers to easily download pictures and music, watch video, and play games. Among those who do not have broadband in Van Wert County, almost 3 in 5 say they do not need it or do not understand the advantages of having it. Another 20 percent say they do not have broadband simply because it is unavailable where they live.

Funding from the stimulus award will help directly link rural and underserved communities, including K-12 schools, state and local government offices, health care facilities, community colleges and universities.

"A strong technology backbone is essential for our rural communities to be competitive in business and for our students to take advantage of digital learning," said Ohio Governor Ted Strickland. "As we move to a technology-driven 21st century economy, it is crucial that no Ohio community is left behind, and I would like to thank President Obama and our congressional leadership for this investment that helps us move toward that goal."

The \$30 million grant will be paired with an additional \$12.9 million from Com Net to construct the new lines. The

company estimates that 300 jobs will be created by the project and that nearly two million people stand to benefit from this project.

One key to getting the award is that Com Net is serving an area that is hard hit by the restructuring of the automotive industry, seen in higher than average unemployment.

Ohio Board of Regents Chancellor Eric Fingerhut declared, "This is a great day for Ohio. Comprehensive broadband services for the state are vital to enhancing education, retraining our displaced workforce and preparing our future workforce to drive Ohio economic development."

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