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## Federal grant to expand broadband access

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A \$30 million grant that will expand broadband Internet access to 28 counties in western Ohio, including Fayette County, was announced Friday as part of President Obama's Recovery Act.

ComNet, Inc., a broadband company based in Wapakoneta, is expected to use the grant money to add nearly 700 miles of fiber optic cable construction. The project is designed to help address the digital divide for 28 counties in western Ohio by providing access to affordable rates to more than 30,000 households in the region. The initiative is estimated to create over 300 jobs.

"The grant money would be helpful," said Fayette County Economic Development Director Rob Hedrick. "It's similar to the meetings we have been having with Connect Ohio, a private firm who's initiative is to have affordable broadband access to every county in the state. In Fayette County, we're better off than a lot of people think in terms of people who have broadband. But there are still rural farmers out there who maybe live on a one-lane road and companies like AT&T aren't going to pay thousands of dollars to put high-speed Internet access out there."

U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, said Friday that broadband expansion is critical to the state's economic development efforts.

Brown sponsored the Rural Broadband Act, legislation that would establish a federal Office of Broadband Initiatives dedicated to creating a comprehensive rural broadband strategic vision and increasing access to the Internet in rural parts of the United States.

"If we want to promote economic development throughout Ohio, we need to ensure that businesses and households have broadband access," said Brown. "Rural communities have been overlooked for far too long."

The grants and loans are part of an overall \$7.2 billion investment the Recovery Act makes in expanding broadband access nationwide - \$4.7 billion through the Commerce Department and \$2.5 billion funded through the Department of Agriculture.