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## Funding approved for Broadband Plan

By Sara Brumfield

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More than \$66 million in federal stimulus funding has been awarded to create a new fiber optic broadband network that will serve 34 counties in Ohio, including all of the Appalachian Ohio counties.

Last Wednesday, Congressman Zack Space, OH-18, announced the funding of the Connecting Appalachian Ohio Broadband Plan, which he says is expected to create 725 jobs during the construction phase, in addition to economic opportunities created by the broadband network.

The \$66.4 million stimulus grant was awarded to Chillicothe-based Horizon Telecom. The grant will fund 70 percent of the \$94.9 million project, with Horizon providing the remaining 30 percent.

According to Horizon, the project, designated the Connecting Appalachian Ohio Middle Mile Consortium, will provide high-capacity broadband services with speeds of up to 10-gigabits per second over a 1,960-mile network to approximately 600 regional community anchor institutions.

Space said the project will directly connect 25 community colleges, 15

university campuses,  
four career training  
centers, 34 county 911 public safety answering points, 32 Ohio Multi-Agency Radio Communications System (MARCS) towers, 212 health care facilities and county health departments, 231 elementary and secondary school buildings, 34 industrial parks and five state park conference centers to high-speed Internet.

According to Horizon, currently, more than 80 percent of those facilities lack fiber-based broadband access and/or the necessary minimum speeds to match their Internet needs.

Tom Reid of Athens was the consultant for the project. He said the project will expand upon Horizon's broadband network that serves the Southern Ohio Health Care Network, more than 36 health care facilities in 13 counties in southern Ohio.

Horizon was earlier awarded an \$18 million contract to complete the health care broadband network, which will be the "backbone" for the new project. That funding was provided by the Federal Communications Commission.

Space said the broadband access will be expanded from the Southern Ohio Health Care Network in the area and move north until it reaches Columbiana County. According to Space, 1,960 new miles of fiber-optic network will be constructed.

Reid said the new network is a "middle mile" project, which simply connects fiber optic broadband to the nearly 600 community anchor institutions. He said "last mile" projects will connect the service to residences and small businesses.

Reid said one example of a "last mile" project is the recently funded \$4.6 million broadband project awarded to Nelsonville TV Cable Inc., which will provide broadband access to approximately 1,400 households and businesses in Athens, Hocking and Morgan counties.

According to Reid, the federal government was careful to make sure that recently funded broadband projects were not duplicative. He said the large "middle mile" project is complimentary to the Nelsonville TV Cable Inc. project.

Reid said the Southern Ohio Health Care Network broadband project was the first phase of the Connecting Appalachia broadband initiative. He said the "middle mile" project was the second phase, which was turned down for funding during the first round of stimulus funds.

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According to Reid, after the project was turned down for funding the first time, all involved parties regrouped and asked Horizon to take the leadership role and provide matching money to create a stronger application. He said the first proposal was larger than the one that was funded. He said the initial proposal included both fiber optic and wireless broadband access.

The counties that will benefit from the newly funded "middle mile" project include: Adams, Athens, Belmont, Brown, Carroll, Clermont, Columbiana, Coshocton, Fairfield, Fayette, Gallia, Guernsey, Harrison, Highland, Hocking, Holmes, Jackson, Jefferson, Knox, Lawrence, Licking, Meigs, Monroe, Morgan, Muskingum, Noble, Perry, Pickaway, Pike, Ross, Scioto, Tuscarawas, Vinton, and Washington.

According to Space, the service area of the project encompasses 16,998 square miles in which 58.9 percent of the geography "lacks even the most rudimentary broadband services."

Space said of the 705,000 households in the 34-county region served by the project, 457,000 are underserved and an additional 125,000 are entirely unserved.

When asked about the current availability of broadband in Athens County, Reid said it is "spotty."

Reid said that Athens County has large portions that are not served by broadband. He said the city of Athens has a few broadband options, but they are relatively slow.

Space said people will begin seeing the benefits of the new project within a year, although no completion date has been set.

"Pure and simple, this is about jobs," Space said. "The truth is that many businesses today simply won't go to a place where they don't have access to both a good workforce and a broadband network. There's no doubt that we have the workforce, and this funding will provide the technology we need to attract new industry to Ohio."

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