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Project to expand broadband in Ohio

Lance Cranmer
Staff Writer

A nearly \$95 million project to bring fiber optic broadband Internet access to Appalachian Ohio will benefit Fayette County.

The Connecting Appalachian Ohio Middle Mile Consortium is a program designed to "fill gaping and persistent holes in broadband coverage across 34 impoverished rural counties," of Ohio, according to a release provided by the CAO-MMC and Horizon Telecom, the Chillicothe-based company spearheading the effort.

"The first thing we have to recognize is that this is going to be a long process. There's a lot of paperwork we have to do up front," said Randy Drewyor, Horizon's Fiber Sales Manager. "We're looking at nine months at the earliest to start construction."

Horizon invested \$30 million up front for the project and was awarded \$66.4 million in federal funding to carry it out. The total budget is \$94,963,209. It will create 464 direct/indirect jobs and 261 induced jobs created by the project.

"Pure and simple, this is about jobs," said Congressman Zack Space (D-Dover), who announced the grant earlier this month. "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."

At its heart, the CAO-MMC project is designed to increase broadband capabilities in order to better connect medical facilities involved in the Southern Ohio Health Care Network.

This will help, "connect 150 or so medical institutions in southern and central Ohio," said Drewyor. "It's a little bigger than that, but that's a starting point. It will give facilities the ability to share health care records. Doctors will be able to share and look at information."

No longer will charts or medical information have to be sent from place to place. Instead it can all be transmitted electronically.

"Hospitals have the vision of economic development," said Drewyor. "High tide raises all boats. They're also doing it to help build the communities they serve."

Adena Health System of Chillicothe, O'Bleness Health System of Athens and Holzer Health Systems of Gallipolis are the major hospitals involved. Fayette County Memorial Hospital is on the list of hospitals who will have access to the new system.

Hospitals won't be the only ones to benefit from the expanded broadband access, though.

"In our proposal, we are building fiber (lines) to one industrial park and one MARCS (enhanced wireless service) tower," Drewyor said of the plans for Fayette County. "And any schools that do not have fiber available. We'll also be taking fiber to them."

The project, which stretches from Columbiana County in the north to Clermont County in the south, will reach 16,998 square miles, which according to Horizon, 58.9 percent of "lacks even the most rudimentary broadband services."

"We're building the backbone of fiber through these counties," Drewyor said. "We know that our vision is to be the premiere provider of broadband services in southeast Ohio. Health care is helping build that out. The Middle Mile Consortium helps increase that footprint.

"By helping serve underserved areas, that helps meet our vision. And helping counties with economic development, bringing fiber into areas will help attract more business."

For 115 years, Horizon operated in Ross County only as a traditional phone service provider, only branching out recently into Pickaway, Pike and Scioto Counties. But Drewyor said the company knew it was time to branch out to bigger and better things.

"Traditional telephone companies go away like dinosaurs," he said. "To exist and be vital, we had to think more broadly. We had to become a communications company. We can do that through fiber. Fiber-based technology is the way to go."