

From the Yakima Herald-Republic Online News.

---

Posted on Thursday, July 21, 2011

A virtual upgrade will offer real gain

Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board

*This editorial was printed in the Friday, July 22, 2011 edition of the Yakima Herald-Republic.*

Traffic congestion on roads has gained its share of attention as federal, state and local governments seek ways to fund projects that move goods and people. But flying under the radar -- in part because the infrastructure lies under the ground -- is the need to move information, a virtual traffic jam that threatens to clog growth in the Yakima Valley.

There is a fix in the works. If a key infrastructure project has its intended effect, Internet traffic will flow more freely through Yakima County.

The Northwest Open Access Network, a nonprofit telecommunications company that is overseen by the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission, is taking steps in that direction. NoaNet, which supplies services to wholesalers like Internet service providers and cable television companies, helps those entities gain increasing access to the rural Northwest. To that end, NoaNet has received two federal grants of more than \$138 million to build new infrastructure for higher speed broadband Internet statewide. The grant is intended to help out communities that are not well served by broadband.

Many of those underserved communities are in our Valley, and NoaNet has landed \$5 million for use in Yakima County. Working with agencies like ESD 105 and the Yakama Nation, NoaNet is identifying areas where the money should go. The plan is to install 200 miles of fiber-optic cable at a cost of \$30,000 to \$50,000 a mile.

A nonprofit like NoaNet is taking this on because rural areas, with their more dispersed populations, don't offer enough return on investment to make it feasible for private companies.

Right now a fiber-optic cable runs along the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad tracks from the Upper Valley through the gap to Grandview. Areas near the line, like the Yakima County Courthouse, receive up to 2 gigabits per second. But service gets spotty in cities farther away. Municipal offices in Sunnyside, seven miles from the fiber-optic line, operate on about 1.5 megabits a second. That stretch of cable is a priority of NoaNet, whose plan would boost speed to 10 gigabits per second.

This is about much more than streaming movies or videos or seeing whether there is anything worth watching on an expanded number of cable TV channels. In many of the Yakima Valley's schools, where computers play an increasing role in instruction, it takes only a few students, teachers or staff to hop onto computers at one time to slow down speeds to the building. Multiply that by hundreds of students and you see the problem.

This is also an economic development tool, giving small businesses in remote areas a hand in competing against other companies. And the proposed expansion holds more than enough capacity for

the future. While largely out of sight, this infrastructure improvement should be top of mind as the Valley seeks new tools for economic development and for educating our children.

*\* Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Sharon J. Prill, Bob Crider, Frank Purdy and Karen Troianello.*