

Work to start this summer on extension of Kitsap's fiber optic network

By Chris Henry

Friday, July 15, 2011

Kitsap Public Utility District is close to breaking ground on a major expansion of Kitsap County's fiber optic cable network.

Pockets of rural and underserved areas of the county to be included in the project have lacked the Internet connectivity that allows students to study online, emergency responders to transmit real-time medical data and rural businesses to process online transactions.

That's about to change.

The \$3 million federal stimulus grant-funded project will add 61 cable miles to the county's current network. Each cable contains 144 fibers, each of which can transmit data on multiple frequencies of light. With data traveling at the speed of light, the capacity of fiber optic technology is barely being tapped by today's electronic devices, said Steve Perry of the PUD.

The project will bring high-speed Internet access to fire stations, schools, libraries and community centers in outlying areas like Seabeck, Indianola and Manchester. It will bring Central Kitsap School District into the fiber optic network — other districts are already connected — and allow private Internet providers to sell their services to rural residents and businesses.

Telecommunications companies often won't extend high-speed lines to rural areas because the cost is too high to serve a small number of customers. But with expansion of the network, businesses in rural areas, including farms, should see increased economic opportunity.

"You can set up a website in Seabeck and be a worldwide presence if you have Internet connectivity," said Rob Kropp, chief technology officer for Northwest Open Access Network (NoaNet), a nonprofit that provides wholesale telecommunications on behalf of the state's 12 public utility districts, including Kitsap's.

NoaNet oversees the statewide stimulus grant that includes Kitsap's \$3 million. Kitsap's project is part of a massive fiber optic expansion that, according to NoaNet, "will create a seamless network reaching more than 170 communities and 2,000 schools, hospitals, emergency responders, libraries, colleges and universities."

NoaNet's broadband network serves as the backbone or "information highway" for the state. Most of Kitsap County's public agencies are already connected, but adding to the backbone will enhance public safety, education and business opportunities in communities that have to date been left out of the loop, said Greg Marney, NoaNet's Chief Executive Officer.

"Remote areas often have only the most rudimentary capabilities needed to share critical information among firefighters, police, hospitals and first responders," Marney said. "Additionally, businesses are reluctant to relocate or expand in areas not served by broadband."

Three years ago, NoaNet secured a \$106 million stimulus grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce, and work paid for by that grant is already under way in other parts of the state. Kitsap's project is part of a second round of stimulus funding secured last summer. The second grant totals \$77 million, including a 30 percent match from local communities.

Kitsap PUD can count its existing network for its share of the match. Kitsap County, cities, fire districts, tribes and school districts will cover the remainder of the match with a cash outlay totaling a little more than \$300,000.

According to local officials, it's a fantastic deal.

"You're talking about pennies on the dollar," Bud Harris, information technology manager for Kitsap County, said last year when the county got news of the grant.

NoaNet is finishing up an environmental-impact statement on second-round grant projects. Once the federal government approves and projects are permitted, Kitsap PUD will begin constructing the new lines. The project is expected to provide employment to 50 workers.

Under terms of the grant, work on Kitsap's broadband extension must be completed in a year-and-a-half at the latest.



© 2011 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online