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Big grant will spread Internet in Madison

By Jonathan D. Austin

Rural Madison County residents will benefit from a \$1.8 million federal grant to extend high-speed Internet service to areas unserved by existing Internet providers.

The service will use the existing French Broad Electric Membership Corp. grid to send two levels of Internet access to residents in Spring Creek, Laurel, and Beech Glenn, as well as areas of Marshall and Mars Hill.

“Reliable high-speed internet is crucial for the future economic development of all three counties in the district,” said N.C. Rep. Ray Rapp, who announced the grant. “French Broad Electric is one of only two recipients in North Carolina of the first round of broadband grants,” he said.

Donald Webb, an electrical engineer with FBEMC, said the company has been running a test of the system in the Windswept Ridge-Long Branch area. With the federal grant, he said the company will begin hanging fiber lines on existing power poles to get the Internet close to rural homes and businesses.

He said residents will be able to choose from either a 256Kbps system or a 1MB connection. “256Kbps is four or five times faster than dial-up,” Webb said. “It will give you basic (web) surfing and email. You can watch some video, but the buffering may slow it down.”

The larger connection will mean “you should be able to do just about anything you want,” he said.

Asked if FBEMC has a map of where the service will be available, Webb said: “We kind of know, based on our maps, but we don’t know down to the individual customer.”

He said some service areas are obvious. “Anything past Walnut along U.S. 25-70 will be covered. We’re not sure yet how far we will push to Laurel, towards the state line. In Spring Creek, you can pretty much say everybody’s going to have it available.”

He said service will go “part of the way” up Meadow Fork Road. “We’re trying to not go where they already have DSL or cable.”

Between Marshall and Mars Hill he said service should be ready in “less than a year” but that the connection to Spring Creek and Laurel could be two years.

Rapp said the new service will mean “that almost 700 businesses and six community institutions will also stand to benefit from the increase in coverage.”

Jeff Lovin, the general manager at FBEMC, said the expansion of Internet access fits well in the company’s focus. “FBEMC was founded on the principle of supplying electricity to those who lived in rural communities and could not get service from investor-owned utilities, and now we are in a similar position with high speed Internet service. FBEMC and its board of directors has put a substantial amount of effort in obtaining this grant funding and we are excited to now have the ability to offer high-speed Internet service to its members in communities that do not have ... access.”

Hunter Goosmann, the general manager of ERC Broadband, said the expansion of Internet service in rural Madison will provide “access to greater learning, retraining, development opportunities and much, much more.”

The federal grant doesn't directly involve ERC Broadband, which is described as a non-profit agency “dedicated to improving the technological infrastructure of the Western Carolinas.” But Goosmann said, “the fact that almost \$2 million will be pumped into Madison County infrastructure is huge! This will ultimately support the constituents of the county, particularly those in more rural areas.”

According to the grant application filed by FBEMC, “critical community organizations in the ... funded service area include Laurel Elementary School, Laurel Medical Center, Spring Creek Volunteer Fire Department, Spring Creek Community Center, Laurel Volunteer Fire Department, and Revere-Rice Cove Community Center.”

Rapp expects a big pay-off from the wider Internet service. “This project will create jobs immediately and drive economic development in the community that will continue to spur job growth for many years to come,” he said.

Webb expects every county community center and fire department to have high-speed Internet when the project is complete, meaning residents who still don't have access will be able to possibly just go to their community center to use an Internet kiosk.

Webb said the service will incorporate a small modem that plugs directly into an outlet and hangs there. It can be plugged directly in to a computer or to a router, he said.

“It works entirely on the existing wire,” he said.

The modem will be sold to customers seeking service, and then there will be a monthly charge on the power bill, he said.

“Our hope is we can provide 1MB (service options) to everybody” eligible, Webb said.

Linda Giltz, a regional planner with the Land-of-Sky Regional Council, said the investment in infrastructure will benefit many in the county. “The lack of high speed Internet has been a significant barrier to people and businesses in rural Madison County – for marketing their products, for accessing information and learning about opportunities, for being an attractive location for businesses to locate, and more. The infrastructure investment will enable existing businesses to grow and will help attract new businesses to the county.”
