



Stimulus dollars bring broadband to rural Florida

By Dave Hodges • DEMOCRAT BUSINESS EDITOR • May 9, 2009

Local government leaders learned Friday that a \$7.2 billion package of federal stimulus dollars is available for development of communications infrastructure, including broadband capacity in underserved areas.

Allen Byington, executive director of the Big Bend Regional Health Information Organization, briefed county and city representatives at the Leon County Commission chambers on the technology potential of such a system.

Officials previously crafted a regional package of stimulus projects valued at \$1.1 billion that would create 15,591 jobs if they are all funded. Byington's group already has FCC grant money to start construction of a fiber optic network in the Big Bend that would connect the region's hospitals for faster, more efficient transfer of medical files.

The stimulus money, however, adds a broader dimension to the network because it is intended to help entire communities obtain such service. "We are sitting right in the middle of where this funding is going to go," Byington said. He said he is working with the Economic Development Council of Tallahassee/Leon County, Leon County Commission Chairman Bryan Desloge, and Tallahassee Mayor John Marks to pursue the network development funds.

Meanwhile, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration is working on the criteria for judging grant applications. According to NTIA spokesman Mark Tolbert, the agency expects to release the grant criteria this summer.

Desloge said the prospect of broadband communication available in rural areas of the Panhandle could have big ramifications. "It opens up a ton of economic development opportunities in these small, rural communities," he said.

The fiber-optic network for the health-information system will have its official kick-off May 27 in Marianna, Byington said. Construction will begin in the fall and the system will be up in about a year. The \$9.6 million project, approved by the Federal Communications Commission in 2007, will link nine hospitals in eight Panhandle counties.