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# State pushes rural broadband<sup>67-61</sup>

Nixon's plan seeks to boost access to 95 percent of homes

**BY DENNIS RICH**

THE SEDALIA DEMOCRAT

The Internet may be an American creation, but the United States continues to lag behind nearly a dozen other nations in high-speed broadband accessibility.

One of the main inhibitors to connectivity is the expense of laying the fiber-optic infrastructure necessary in rural areas. On March 30, Gov. Jay Nixon, through his MoBroadband-

MoBroadbandNow is a five-year plan the governor put forth last year with a goal of increasing access to 95 percent of Missouri homes — up from the roughly 80 percent who now have such

access.

“While the majority of the state is covered there is still 20 percent that does not have access — we are working to narrow this down and level the playing field. From a cost benefit standpoint — there hasn’t been a lot of incentive for providers to embark on these projects — there just aren’t enough people per mile for them to make that investment. Now we have Recovery money

Now initiative, gave support to 11 proposals that seek American Recovery and Reinvestment Act dollars to help close the digital gap in rural areas. Among the applicants is Tipton-based Co-Mo Electric Cooperative, which serves some 32,000 customers in a 2,300 square-mile swath of central Missouri.

The Recovery Act appropriated \$7.2 billion to expand broadband access through

available providing that incentive,” Holste said.

Kenneth Johnson, Co-Mo’s general manager and CEO said the issue of accessibility is even greater in the cooperative’s coverage area where independent studies found that only about 18 percent of customers had access to high-speed Internet services.

“Most of that is from

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Department of Agriculture’s Rural Utilities Service and The Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications Information Administration.

Scott Holste, Nixon’s press secretary, said





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cable or DSL and is well below the national average for rural areas which is about 41 percent of homes," Johnson said.

The company is seeking \$66 million in stimulus dollar grants and low-interest loans to run about 4,000 miles of fiber-optic line to each of its residential and commercial customers. Johnson said the company expects to hear back by early fall and expects the project to take about three years to complete.

"We have had a lot of positive feedback from our members and it is something they have expressed an interest in since I started here about four-and-a-half years ago. We have done a number of member surveys and feel confident that we will see a very favorable payback on our investment," Johnson said.

Randy Lindt, Co-Mo's information technology manager, said the durability and

capacity of fiber-optic lines ensured that the investment would have a long lifetime and could be upgraded regularly as technology develops.

"There is almost unlimited capacity in the lines and they last about 30 years. Really, once they are in the ground what we will have to replace and upgrade are the

physical components at either end," Lindt said.

Holste said the governor's plan stressed the development of broadband access to spur economic growth and help Missourians become more competitive in an increasingly global and digital economy. The plan also stresses the benefits of distance learning and telemedicine.

The Co-Mo plan will deliver new opportunities to members, and to 43 schools, 16 health facilities, and four libraries in their service area.

"In addition to our members, we have had a lot of interest and support from all the communities we serve through their chambers or

city councils. Everyone seems very supportive of what we are trying to do," Johnson said.

The new technology also will help Co-Mo develop a next generation "smart grid" that will allow the cooperative to reduce consumer costs with more accurate billing and usage measuring, as well as "dramatically improving our restoration of outages," Johnson said.

In addition to the Co-Mo plan, Nixon also gave approval to:

- BlueBird Media, of Columbia, which plans to build a middle-mile network in northern Missouri;

- Boycom Cablevision, of Poplar Bluff, which plans to

build a middle-mile network along the U.S. Highway 60 corridor in southern Missouri and into the Bootheel;

- Sho-Me Technologies, of Marshfield, which plans to build a middle-mile network in central and south central Missouri;

- SpringNet, a division of City Utilities of Springfield, which would provide broad-

band to customers in the metropolitan Springfield area;

- American Fiber Systems, of Rochester, N.Y., which plans to provide connections to several Metropolitan Community College facilities in Jackson County.

- Big River Telephone Company, of Cape Girardeau, which would provide broadband to households and businesses in southeast Missouri;

- Cass County, which would provide broadband to households and businesses in western Missouri;

- Finally Broadband, of Seymour, which would provide broadband to households and businesses in south central Missouri;

- Socket, of Columbia, which would provide broadband to households in central Missouri; and

- United Electric Cooperative, of Savannah, which would provide broadband to households and businesses in northwest Missouri.

*drich@sedaliademocrat.com*