

County looks at lack of broadband coverage

By Siobhan Barton Columbia-Greene Media | Posted: Friday, March 20, 2015 12:00 am

The Columbia Economic Development Corporation last week chose ECC Technologies, a Penfield-based technology and communications consulting group, to conduct a countywide broadband connectivity survey.

The \$40,000 survey is the latest step in a plan to establish broadband access throughout the county with the least access in the state.

“Essentially our goal for this is to create a tool for the county,” ECC President Joe Starks said.

Starks revealed the survey’s components Thursday at a corporation broadband forum, held at Columbia-Greene Community College.

The company will undertake an inventory study that will record locations of telephone poles, cell towers, fiberoptics and other structures in Columbia County, Starks said.

“They’re going to drive every single road in this county and identify infrastructure that’s out there,” Starks said.

The study will take about three to four weeks, he said.

“By gathering all that information... it will allow us to start to create the foundations we need to ask for grants in the future,” Starks said.

The infrastructures and their owners will be recorded in a private Geo Spacial Information database, he said.

Once gaps in coverage are identified, “we’ll start to focus specific programs on how to target those areas in the county from the business perspective and the residential perspective with relationship to broadband,” Starks said.

The survey will be completed by the end of the summer, Starks said.



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From left, Columbia County Planning and Economic Development Commissioner Ken Flood, ECC Technologies President Joseph Starks, Deputy District Director Ann Mueller and state Broadband Program Office Director David Salway.

Starks said his company will meet with service providers later that day to discuss partnerships in the broadband expansion process.

Five companies in Columbia County provide broadband service, including Mid-Hudson Cable, GTel, FairPoint Communications, Time-Warner Cable and Charter Communications. The nation's largest Internet provider, Comcast, does not do business in the county. Verizon does not offer its FIOS broadband service in the county.

"We're struggling and fighting here in Upstate New York as in other rural areas just to get basic broadband," Starks said.

In New York state, 1 million residents and 4,000 businesses lack broadband access, according to information from the state Office for Technology's Broadband Program Management Office.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo in this year's state budget proposed \$70 million in broadband investments to ensure statewide high-speed Internet service by 2019.

David Salway, director of the state Office for Technology's Broadband Program, appeared at the forum to brief a room full of county supervisors, service providers, concerned residents and one state assemblymember on the statewide program.

Currently, the state definition of broadband is 6 mbps or megabytes per second/1.5mbps.

If Cuomo's budget passes, the New NY broadband program will guarantee 25 mbps speeds to remote communities to more than 160,000 households and 8,000 businesses, Salway said during Thursday's presentation.

Cuomo's program is designed to increase sustainable broadband adoption by providing "low-cost Internet service for those that qualify, access to devices for those that don't have it and digital literacy training," Salway said.

It would be funded by public and private sector partnerships and a required sector one to one match.

The ability stream and upload video and to advertise and take orders via the Internet are important tools for business owners like Kim Grethen, of RGM Productions in North Chatham.

Grethen, also the chairwoman of the Chatham Broadband Committee, appeared at the meeting to explain how sluggish Internet speed affects the ability to send video to customers.

"My husband used to drive and sit in a parking lot in East Greenbush to send movies," said Grethen, of North Chatham. "He needed to find somewhere it didn't take three hours to send a file."

She said her goal was to make Columbia County a magnet for business by advocating for better broadband standards.

“We’re not doing this because people want to watch movies on Netflix,” Grethen said. “We’re doing this because it will drive business in Columbia County.”

The program would work in tandem with a \$2 billion Smart Schools Initiative, which will go toward funding technology upgrades in school districts across the state.

Voters approved the smart schools bond last November.

“What smart schools is designed to do is to work in conjunction with our New New York program to provide connectivity to schools as a primary purpose but also to extend the reach of that access to the community as a whole,” Salway said.

Increased broadband accessibility would also increase students’ ability to do work outside of school, said Ann Mueller, U.S. Rep. Chris Gibson’s 19th District deputy director.

“There are many families in New York state where children can’t do homework,” Mueller said at the forum. “That’s not economics, it’s just that the providers are not there for them.”

Mueller sits on the Ichabod Crane School District Technology Committee, where she said the district is attempting to troubleshoot ways to help 40 to 75 kids who have no Internet access when most homework requires students to use the Internet outside of class.

Internet speed also affects the county’s agricultural economy, Supervisor Ron Knott said.

“Agricultural communities have got to use the Internet, too,” Knott said. “We don’t think about it that often.”

Knott referenced Dutch Hollow Farms, on the border of Rensselaer and Columbia counties, which “can barely even get a phone signal,” he said.

“If a farm wants to make jam and sell it online, they can’t do it without Internet,” Assemblywoman Didi Barrett, D-106, said at the forum.

Barrett said broadband “had not been a priority in county government” in the past, but she was glad to see the overdue issue had become of more importance.

The CEDC plans to request public participation on the broadband issue at future meetings, but there are no meeting dates planned at this time, said Commissioner Kenneth J. Flood.

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