

Fiber optics get started in Steuben

By Sharon Stroh | Posted: Friday, June 18, 2010 12:00 am

In Northeast Indiana, fiber technology is beginning to make its first appearances. The City of Auburn has fiber directly to the premises, through their city-owned utility, although they don't offer it outside the city limits, therefore not encompassing all of Dekalb County. Ft. Wayne and New Haven have been using Verizon FIOS since 2007, but it is not currently available anywhere else in the state, and in truth, is only offered in 80 cities across the whole United States (Verizon press release).

In Wabash County, both city and county officials approved a resolution in March to create a tax increment financing (TIF) district, so that a large for-profit firm can bring fiber to the cities of Wabash and North Manchester, and a portion of the county. However, the city itself needs to make its own investment- over \$1.3 million in bonds- to help offset the costs of installation.

But in Steuben County, iMAN, a nonprofit supporting organization of the Steuben County Community Foundation, is a community-owned fiber optic backbone, making sure return on investment stays local— providing both operating income and grantmaking funds to the communities served by its fiber structure. This means that local residents are the shareholders, and under the current structure, will reap the rewards of 70% of all income, not just profits, from each subscriber. Furthermore, the costs to install the fiber in large part can be funded through grants and/or charitable contributions.

iMAN has over 10 miles of fiber in the Angola area, beginning in the downtown area and moving up Hoosier Hill to 300 North. Customers include the City of Angola, Steuben County Communications, MSD of Steuben County, Cameron Memorial Community Hospital, Urgent Care and the doctors building, Tri-State Medical Imaging, Univertical Corporation, Metal Spinners, and Vestil Manufacturing. There are about 80 identified new customers for the fiber optic backbone. In addition, there is the likely possibility that iMAN can be replicated throughout the northeast Indiana region, bringing even more methods for connectivity throughout the area (consider such industries as Cold Heading with facilities in Fremont and Ashley, or KPC Media with offices in Steuben, Noble and Dekalb counties).

iMAN's deployment plans for 2010 include an additional 11 miles of fiber connecting Fremont and the north EMS station, and Fox Lake Road to the south. With additional financial support, deployment can move toward Hamilton, Orland and Ashley/Hudson within the next year as well.

This is a business deployment concept for those that need speed, security, and affordability somewhere between their current “high speed” shared connections and dedicated T-1 lines. Typical users are those that need point-to-point connections (one office to another), or that have outgrown what DSL carriers have available. iMAN is not designed as a residential product, however, the iMAN fiber may be utilized by service providers who want to develop this market.

Lt. Governor Becky Skillman hosted a broadband summit in the fall of 2008 which outlines very specifically the need for a fiber optic system to keep all Hoosiers competitive in the business arena, especially the high-technology needs of industries such as healthcare, advanced manufacturing, and defense. Skillman says “Consumer demands, global economic requirements and the evolution of technology points to one conclusion: Indiana and the nation is shifting to a fiber-optic network.”

And while wireless certainly plays a role in the technological advancement of data transmission, wireless alone is too susceptible to environmental interference, it’s not secure, and bandwidth is limited. Companies that need to transmit sensitive data (banks, hospitals, legal firms, etc) will not use a strict wireless system. The National Broadband Plan, released in March, 2010 reiterates the same concern plus adds, “the quality of the signal [wireless] depends on how far the user is from the cell tower, and how many users are using the network at the same time”. In other words, wireless speed and quality are compromised in ways that fiber networks are not.

It’s been demonstrated throughout recent news sources that broadband technology is a key driver of economic growth. The ability to share large amounts of information at ever-greater speeds increases productivity, facilitates commerce, and drives innovation. iMAN helps retain current businesses and attract new businesses by offering secure, maximum speed data communications solutions in a way that is extremely cost-effective. Help support iMAN, and build a new era in economic development for Steuben County and other counties in northeast Indiana.

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