

iMAN a good concept, a good project

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When rural electric cooperatives were formed some seven or eight decades ago, they were done so not only to provide electric service in rural communities but out of necessity.

Investor-owned utilities were not about to put the money required to string electric wire for miles and miles only to reach a few customers. It took a pooling of resources to get the capital raised, the poles set and the copper wire installed. Electric utilities such as Steuben County REMC and others are still thriving today after so many years of serving their member customers. The model of a cooperative is a good one.

A similar movement is afoot with the installation of fiber optic cable in Steuben County, though it is not a true cooperative and is currently not reaching out to farm house after farm house.

An arm of the Steuben County Community Foundation, Indiana Metropolitan Area Network, or iMAN, is doing what investor-owned utilities will not: make a huge investment in providing fiber optic cable in a rural community so high-speed communications may take place.

Over \$500,000 from the Community Foundation and other entities in the community has been invested in this project since its inception in 2001. So far, the infrastructure for iMAN is pretty much limited to Angola. All public schools in Angola are connected to the system, as are Cameron Memorial Community Hospital, Angola government and some medical offices. The system is currently being expanded to the Fremont community where schools and government will soon be connected to the network.

Most recently, the Community Foundation provided some \$200,000 to get the project heading north to Fremont.

Then on Tuesday, iMAN representatives and members of the community approached the Steuben County Commissioners with a funding request of \$2.3 million to complete the project. When the project is complete, there will be some 70 miles of fiber optic cable run in Steuben County; when the line reaches Fremont, there will be 18 miles including what is up and running in Angola.

Steuben County government sees the benefit of fiber. In switching its broadband technology in government offices, the county is getting on to the iMAN system.

What was asked of the county on Tuesday was to make an investment in the future. Fiber technology is available in metropolitan areas. Like the 19th century when there was no electricity in Smalltown U.S.A., it is small communities like Steuben County that are without fiber today. Without fiber, we can't compete in the business world because we are lacking high-speed connectivity.

Other communities in our four-county area have heard the iMAN story and are interested in jumping aboard. The concept is unique. After all of the hardware is in place, fees charged of users end up paying for the system and money left over — profit, as it would be called by an investor utility — is returned to the Steuben County Community Foundation.

This unique model benefits not only the user, but the programs of the foundation.

We certainly hope the commissioners and eventually the Steuben County Council buy into this program by using Major Moves transportation money for this important infrastructure project. And we hope there will come a day when iMAN or perhaps an investor-owned utility subcontracting with iMAN will start running fiber to residents.