

Fiber optics important for economic growth

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Congratulations to Angola based Indiana Metropolitan Area Network (iMAN) for being named the technology finalist in the Greater Fort Wayne Business Weekly's fifth annual Innovation Awards competition.

From the seven category finalists, chosen from a field of 50, an Innovator of the Year will be announced Nov. 11 at Sweetwater Sound in Fort Wayne.

The effort by iMAN to bring fiber optic systems (which provide unprecedented speed for large-scale transfer of data) to Steuben County is worthy of Business Weekly's Innovator of the Year award because:

- Fiber optic systems are an important tool for long-term economic growth.
- Locally owned, iMAN is operating under the umbrella of the Steuben County Community Foundation. Profits from user fees from the fiber optics system revert to funds to help the communities from which the user fees are received. Sharon Stroh, former head of the Steuben County Community Foundation, is the project coordinator.
- Broadband is particularly important in rural areas, where advanced communications can shrink the distances that can isolate communities.
- Most tier one telecoms are not interested in providing this infrastructure to areas with low-density populations.

The Steuben County Commissioners are considering investing \$2.3 million in Major Moves Transportation fund money to help the non-profit company expand. Bill Geiger, iMAN project manager, requested the funding from the county at the commissioners' Sept. 7 meeting. Further discussion is expected Monday.

The Major Moves money from Steuben County would help iMAN build the final 68 miles of the fiber optics network, connecting all schools in Steuben County. The network, centered in Angola, connects Angola government, schools, Cameron Memorial Community Hospital and medical offices in the city.

The network will be extended to Fremont this year. The plan is to connect to the north Emergency Medical Service station on S.R. 120

at C.R. 50W, the Fox Lake Road area, Pleasant Lake and Pleasant Lake to C.R. 700S.

Work would continue next year to take fiber to Hamilton, Ashley-Hudson, Orland and Prairie Heights Community Schools. In 2012 the network would expand to Clear Lake, York, Metz, Salem Center and Flint.

The goal is to then expand the fiber optics network to neighboring counties, possibly working through their community foundations.

Fiber connectivity can:

- Provide access to a wide range of educational, cultural, and recreational opportunities and resources.
- Facilitate provision of medical care to unserved and underserved populations through remote diagnosis, treatment, monitoring and consultations with specialists.
- Promote economic development and revitalization through e-commerce by creating new jobs and attracting new industries.
- Help protect the public by facilitating public safety including early warning systems and disaster preparedness; remote security monitoring; backup systems for communications networks.
- Provide access to new telecommunications technologies such as Voice Over Internet Protocol and special communications services for people with disabilities.

Because there is a community foundation in each county in Indiana (made possible in great part by the GIFT Initiative offered by Lilly Endowment), the not-for-profit plan can be replicated throughout Indiana and possibly in other states.

We applaud iMAN's innovative grassroots effort.