

Steuben funds fiber project

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ANGOLA — Steuben County Council members approved providing \$2 million for the build of a fiber optics network in Steuben County through a program working with an arm of the Steuben County Community Foundation.

The project will expand the fiber optics system currently in place in Angola and connect it to each community in Steuben County through the Indiana Metropolitan Area Network, a non-profit organization that operates under the umbrella of the Community Foundation.

The \$2 million will be spent as the system gets built. The work will be bid out, but due to the arrangement between iMAN and the Community Foundation, it is highly unlikely that private business will compete for the project.

Expanding the high-speed communications network has been identified as a key component of the recently completed strategic plan of the Steuben County Economic Development Corp.

“I just feel like helping iMAN move forward is one of the most important things we can do for economic development,” said Councilwoman Sara Tubergen. “It’s what Major Moves is for.”

The funds would come from the county’s Major Moves Transportation fund, which came from the lease of the Indiana Toll Road.

Council President Bill Booth questioned whether the county would be able to contract with a non-profit for the build of the fiber optics system.

To satisfy his concerns and those of other council members, the appropriation was contingent upon approval from the State Board of Accounts, which oversees government spending of all forms in Indiana. Also, a legal opinion on the matter must pass muster.

“I’m not against this thing,” Booth said. “I’m just a little concerned about the mechanics of it.”

After the system gets built, fees paid to iMAN for service include a payback to community funds established through the Community Foundation.

For example, each community in the county has a fund through the foundation. When fees are paid to iMAN for service in Angola, a certain percentage goes to the Angola fund held by the Community Foundation. Such a fund will be established for Steuben County and 20 percent of fees paid to iMAN would go to that fund.

The county, like each community, can use the funds for providing grants.

Currently the iMAN system is in use in Angola. The system is used by Angola government, Cameron Memorial Community Hospital and other medical facilities and all Metropolitan School District of Steuben County schools in town. Steuben County is going to use the system for its high speed communications needs in the near future.

The system is being expanded to Fremont. Within days it will connect with the county's emergency medical service station on S.R. 120 at C.R. 50W at Country Meadows Golf Resort. The system will then be extended along S.R. 120 to Fremont.

Officials have said that if it were up to private industry to build a fiber optics system in Steuben County, it would take years because it isn't very cost effective to take on such a project in a rural setting.