

iMAN a national broadband leader

By Mike Marturello | Posted: Wednesday, August 28, 2013 12:00 am

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ANGOLA — The Indiana Metropolitan Area Network that provides a fiber optics system in Steuben County is one that is touted across the country.

The iMAN system, which provides a fiber optics system to business, government, health care and education entities in Steuben County, has been in operation some 14 years.

iMAN is an arm of the Steuben County Community Foundation and operates as a non-profit organization whose goal is to provide fiber connectivity at a low cost to the community then if possible turn a portion of the fees collected back to the foundation, which will distribute the money through grants.

“Those of you in this room should be very proud of the job you’ve done,” said Craig Settles, a broadband expert and consultant from Oakland, Calif. Settles was one of the speakers in iMAN’s community project update presented at Witmer Clubhouse, Zollner Golf Course, Trine University.

“Steuben County has been able to move forward because you were willing to take the ball and make things happen,” Settles said.

Settles said Steuben County was one of the country’s broadband success stories because local leaders worked to form a non-profit that is providing a needed service that would otherwise not be done were it left to private business.

“The ability to transform your community is very powerful,” Settles said.

The iMAN network has 64 companies providing point-to-point fiber optics line. The organization took in \$127,000 in revenue in 2012, said Jennifer Danic, executive director of the Community Foundation. Of the revenue, 84 percent was used for operational and physical expenses with the remaining 16 percent turned over to the Community Foundation.

iMAN’s Jad Donaldson said the network is on the verge of breaking out of its island status where it will be interconnected to the main fiber hub in South Bend.

Donaldson said it has cost \$3.3 million in grants and local government funds to put the iMAN fiber network in place. He estimates that its users have saved \$5.5 million in service fees that would have been charged by private fiber service providers.

Most importantly, Donaldson and Dave Koenig of the Steuben County Economic Development Corp. stressed, iMAN provides the community with a tool that will attract companies.

“If a company wants to move to Steuben County, we’ve got data,” Donaldson said.

“We have a competitive advantage in Steuben County,” Koenig said.

Donaldson said the fiber system now offered in almost all Steuben County communities — the Hamilton leg will be complete soon — is comparable to any offered in a major metropolitan area.

In addition to a local report, iMAN was on center stage for other communities interested in a similar system, including Blackford County and Ottumwa, Iowa. Six officials from Ottumwa had been in Steuben County the past two days to see the iMAN model in action first hand.

“It’s very motivational to take back what you have shown us,” said David Barajas, executive director of the Ottumwa Economic Development Corp.