Supervisors near decision on broadband blueprints

By Christopher Connell
THE PIEDMONT JOURNALISM FOUNDATION

The future of broadband in Fauquier County is now — or almost now.

The Board of Supervisors is poised to decide at its Aug. 8 monthly meeting whether to move forward on selecting one or both proposals from two private companies — or neither — to lay fiber and provide high-speed connections in other ways to the thousands of residents and scores of businesses that now have no broadband or spotty, slower-speed service.

It will hear staff recommendations, hold a public hearing to hear from residents, and then vote. But the board could hold the public hearing open for a month or so to consider public comments, said Deputy County Administrator Katie Heritage.

“Broadband is not a public utility, unfortunately. I wish it were. But you can’t get Comcast or Verizon or most anybody else to come and be willing to extend their network where they can’t make a profit.”

KATIE HERITAGE
Deputy County Administrator

The timetable “is not written in stone as these are very complex and technical proposals requiring a lot of evaluation, financial analysis and back and forth” with the chosen bidders, Omnipoint Technology Partners and Tenebris Fiber, she said.

Originally the board planned a hearing and vote in mid-June but delayed to ask for more specifics from Omnipoint — now Data Stream Mobile Technologies — and also to clarify what the contractors would be expected to deliver.

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New four-man Bike Unit patrols county’s trails and subdivisions

By Robin Earl
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Lesa Fork calls the members of Fauquier County Sheriff’s Office Bike Unit her “knights in shining armor.”

She was walking in Whitney State Forest in Warrenton on June 17 with her service dog, a Belgian Tervuren named Teagan. They were about three-quarters of a mile from the entrance to the park, heading back, when she saw a juvenile black bear on the path in front of her. “He stepped out onto the trail and just looked at us,” she said. “Then he turned and started walking the same way we were walking. I didn’t know what to do. He was between me and my van.”

Fork called her dog to her side and used her cellphone to call her husband, who was at home not far away; he called 911 and headed to the park. She called 911 too.

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Supervisors near decision on broadband blueprints

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The county has already earmarked $29 million over four years from capital improvement funds to make broadband available to every home and business in the county, the same goal that states and the federal government have set for all rural America.

Broadband providers being considered

Omnipoint, originally part of a Springfield, Massachusetts, company with the same name started in 2015, was acquired by Data Stream, a larger Florida company. Omnipoint has already begun new broadband service in several villages under a separate contract with the county, mounting equipment on towers that let it send a broadband radio signal to nearby subscribers.

Tenebris is a 1-year-old reincarnation of Freedom Telecommunications, the fiber-layering company the county originally chose in 2017 to make broadband universal, but which failed before the job began. FTS encountered severe financial problems, ousted its president and eventually dissolved. A comparable fiber network it was building in Kent County, Maryland, had to be finished by another company.

While there is ample broadband offered by competing providers in Warrenton and other populous places, large, rural stretches of the county, mainly in the north and south, have no broadband or slow, unreliable service. Some homes sit on rocky, hilly terrain that is hard to dig and which the big internet companies have decided are too difficult and expensive to reach.

Critics weigh in

The amount the county plans to spend on a broadband solution and the method it has used to winnow potential partners has aroused criticism, most notably from small entrepreneurs who now provide broadband in areas unserved by Comcast or Verizon.

Claude Schoch of High Mountain Farm Broadband in The Plains, who did not submit a design proposal, said it makes no sense “to start from scratch” with two outside companies that he believes will likely run new fiber on top of the existing lines anyway. Faquier is already bisected with hundreds of miles of fiber “put in by a lot of experienced companies” that could be extended at much lower costs, he argues, with entrepreneurs like him filling in the gaps. Schoch, a persistent critic of the county’s approach, also fears any infrastructure built for the county could soon face obsolescence.

Supervisor Rick Gerhardt, who chairs the Faquier County Broadband Authority, contends that Schoch’s criticisms stem from self-interest. The supervisor said Schoch “basically has a monopoly at this time” in certain parts of northern Faquier where High Mountain connects home and business customers with fiber.

“Anything the county does to improve or provide additional broadband solutions jeopardizes his market and other potential markets he is looking to move into,” Gerhardt said.

Paul Conlin, owner of Blaze Broadband, a Wireless Internet Service Provider with 1,500 customers, did send the county a menu of options last year to expand broadband, but was told by county officials his suggestions weren’t sufficiently detailed and fell short of a complete solution.

Conlin foresees the county trying to recoup its $20 million by charging broadband providers fees for using the new infrastructure, driving up rates for customers. “Can we afford it?” he asked, adding that it’s difficult to know at this point.

The proposals

Tenebris — the name means “dark” in Latin — would tie its dark fiber line for Faquier into a larger line it hopes to run along highway 601 from Virginia Beach north through Faquier to Ashburn, in neighboring Loudoun County. The fiber would be tied there to a data center hub that carries internet traffic throughout the eastern United States and beyond. Tenebris is seeking private investment capital to fuel its growth.

(Tenebris inherited from FTS a $583,000 contract to build a dedicated fiber network for the Fredericksburg, Virginia, system. The district’s technology chief lauds Tenebris’s work.)

The county selected Omnipoint and Tenebris last November to draw up the detailed plans now under review by the county and its broadband consultant Larry Cornwell.

All signs point to the board’s awarding of the contract to both companies, especially since they have proposed different but complementary approaches to getting broadband to scattered homes in challenging terrain.

Hershey says the county’s request “contemplates it could be a hybrid solution, both fiber and towers, because there are places in this county where fiber will never go. Nobody is going to run fiber out to Orlean. There’s going to have to be a tower solution for some of these more remote areas.”

KATIE HERITAGE

Deputy County Administrator

also regards corporate changes at the bidding companies as no cause for concern. “The industry is constantly changing like lightning. It’s not unusual for there to be reorganizations, as you see with these two companies,” she said.

Gerhardt pointed out that Faquier is already making incremental improvements in broadband in Casanova, Ensors Shop and Gold-vein where Omnipoint/Data Stream has added its wireless equipment to towers and begun signing up customers.

“They soon will be broadcasting from the cell tower in Calverton. Like residents in the vicinity of the Casanova cell tower ... (those) within the signal propagation of the new locations now have an option for high-speed broadband,” Gerhardt told the Times.

The county is paying Omnipoint $2,000 a month for each new tower it adds service and, with the Economic Development Authority and support from the PATH Foundation, provides other incentives to build new towers where needed. The county would recoup subsidies of up to $100,000 per tower by sharing revenues from new broadband customers.

Catlett and Hume are next on the list for broadband delivered by radio signal from towers, and the county is considering other two sites, Heritage said.

For the much larger, county-wide job, Omnipoint originally proposed a $26.8 million plan to install nearly 130 miles of fiber as well as wireless installation, tower construction and other items. Omnipoint said then the fixed wireless portion would provide broadband to 90 percent of Faquier’s residences. The towers and wireless equipment would bridge the “last mile” to remote customers.

Tenebris sought $22 million to install a 134-mile, mostly underground dark fiber network, using contractors for the digging and delivering “the core fiber infrastructure and a fully operational network in approximately 42 months.” The fiber would reach “all four corners of the county” and the network would be open to all internet providers including wireless ones.

(According to Field Engineer, a telecom industry publication, “dark” fiber refers to any unused fiber optic line that carries data at high speeds. Owners lease strands in their fiber conduits to multiple customers, including businesses, government, schools and local internet service providers.)

See BROADBAND, Page 5
A tower puts Casanova in the internet fast lane

By Jonathan Hunley
Contribution Writer

Dee Dee Kanney was aghast when she got a $400-plus bill for internet service a couple of years ago. She was accustomed to paying $45 a month.

But her granddaughter, who was living with the Kanneys while doing a medical internship, had been catching up on television shows she'd missed by using the internet provider's on-demand service. She didn't realize that was driving her grandfather's data usage into the stratosphere.

Adding insult to injury, the streaming video would frequently buffer, interrupting play-back.

Fast-forward to today. Dee Dee and James Kanney can stream all the movies they want for one price, and they don't have to endure endless buffering. The Casanova couple are two of about 65 customers who now get their internet from Omnipoint Technology, which broadcast a radio-wave signal from a 145-foot tower on Casanova Road.

The wireless internet service from the tower that started in 2018 has dramatically improved access for customers who couldn't get broadband from Comcast or other internet providers as residents in bigger, more densely populated places do.

"For anybody in a rural area, it is such a boon," says Dee Dee Kanney.

Fauquier residents may be familiar with Omnipoint, as one of the two outside companies bidding for a $20 million-plus contract from the county to extend broadband across its entire 651 square miles to give every home and business access to high-speed internet. Tenebris, the other company bidding to address the broadband problem, has no clients in Fauquier.

But Omnipoint, a small, Springield, Massachusetts-based firm recently acquired by a larger Florida company, Data Stream Mobile Technologies, already has a much smaller contract utilizing a county subsidy and a community development grant from the PATH Foundation to solve the broadband problem in Casanova and several other hamlets by mounting wireless equipment on towers.

The Fauquier SPCA is among them too. The animal shelter and rescue organization was paying $500 a month for slow service with interruptions. "Toward the end, it was going down more and more," said Lynn Consolla, SPCA's data manager. Now its Omnipoint bill for faster, more reliable internet is roughly $100. "We were waiting for this," Consolla added.

Bob Friel, who lives on Rogues Road in Casanova, was getting internet through a cellular hotspot that cost him $90 per month. Now he pays $62 a month for Omnipoint's faster service. Simply checking email could be a hassle before; now he can stream video such as the Netflix series "Our Planet" without a hitch.

Mark Knight, who lives nearby, also relied on a hotspot but would exceed his data limit just doing homework from Lord Fairfax Community College. "It was ridiculous," Knight said. "Now, we can stream. We can download. It's been fantastic." It makes him feel like a "real" person when it comes to using the internet.

Robert Ridgell, vice chairman of the county's broadband advisory committee, saves about $120 a month with Omnipoint, in part by cancelling his DirecTV subscription since he now can stream video. More importantly, the fast, reliable internet service lets him work from home a day or more each week.

"It's allowing me to spend more time in Fauquier," said Ridgell, who believes having broadband has bumped up the resale value of his house on Beach Road.

The big internet providers that offer broadband in most of the county don't provide the service in many less populous places or only come in if small clusters of homeowners and businesses are willing to pay steep installation costs.

Comcast initially told Ridgell it would cost $20,000 to extend fiber 1,300 feet to his house and then said it wasn't interested in an extension at all, he said.

When Jen Lux and her family moved to Casanova last August, "I couldn't believe anybody wouldn't provide the service," she said. Now, with Omnipoint's plan, the house gets high-speed service that keeps her 7- and 9-year-old sons happily at play on their iPad and Xbox and even supports a smart security system.

She's also pleased that the Omnipoint equipment isn't an eyesore on her roof. It's a square box fastened behind her chimney and smaller than a dinner plate. "Casanova definitely needed it," she said.

Superintendent Rick Gerhardt, the board chairman who has spearheaded the push for universal broadband, believes residents can take confidence from the gains Fauquier is already making in expanding access incrementally in Casanova and elsewhere.

"DataStream/Omnipoint has launched service on the county's Enors Shop tower in southern Fauquier, as well as the new cell tower in Goldvein. Moreover, soon they will be broadcasting from the cell tower in Calverton," Gerhardt told the Times.

Deputy County Administrator Katie Heritage says the county is looking to get wireless broadband equipment on towers in Catlett and Hume next and is considering placements in two other places.

To benefit from this approach, homes must be within the signal propagation of the new locations.

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Adam Noll, co-founder of Tenebris and its chief commercial officer, said Omnipoint "would be the perfect company for us to work with." Tenebris wouldn't itself offer broadband service, but lease its fiber to all comers.

Challenges

Charles Thomas, chief operating officer for Data Stream, says it will take a combination of technologies to bring broadband to the entire county. "You've got to have the wireless, you've got to have the towers and you've got to have the fiber," he said.

"We will utilize as much of the current infrastructure as possible," he added, and minimize how much digging is necessary through rocky ground. "It's definitely going to be a challenge to get fiber up to Little Cobbler Mountain or Bellevue Farms."

Getting broadband over that "last mile" is the hardest and most expensive challenge for any internet provider and it is why big companies such as Comcast and Verizon don't blanket the entire county or demand thousands of dollars to connect small clusters of homes.

Heritage said she gets up to 15 calls a week from residents asking the county to intercede. When she asks if they and their neighbors are willing to split the installation costs if providers won't, "They say, 'Oh no. We don't want to pay for that. It should be like water and sewer," says Heritage. "Well, it's not. Broadband is not a public utility, unfortunately. I wish it were. But you can't get Comcast or Verizon or most anybody else to provide the service and be willing to build their network where they can't make a profit."

The FCC estimates broadband is unavailable to 25 million Americans, three-quarters of whom live in rural communities.

For its investment, the county hopes to better position itself to secure grants from the Virginia Telecommunications Initiative, the Federal Communications Commission, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and elsewhere to reduce the burden on taxpayers.

A dozen Virginia counties that shared nearly $5 million in VTI grants in March put up $9 million in local and private sector matching funds. Fauquier wasn't among them.

Christopher Connell is an independent journalist working for the Piedmont Journalism Foundation on this broadband series. He is a former Associated Press assistant bureau chief in Washington.

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