For Gerhardt, the quest for broadband is personal

By Christopher Connell
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Before Rick Gerhardt donned the leadership mantle in Fauquier County’s pursuit of broadband for all, the Cedar Run Supervisor experienced firsthand the frustrations of trying to get a reliable internet connection at home on the family farm outside Culpeo.

“I’ve had everything from Verizon wireless, which mounted a small antenna outside the house, to Hughes and Exede (satellite services), to Blaze Broadband,” he recalled in an interview at the Board of Supervisors office in Warrenton.

Gerhardt made universal broadband his signature issue. He has led the county’s initiative every step of the way, from earmarking $20 million in capital improvement funds for broadband, to personally looking for companies capable of doing the job, to the board’s unanimous Aug. 8 decision to seek a comprehensive agreement with Data Stream, a Florida firm experienced in doing tower work for major carriers.

At the same time, the board gave Gerhardt a green light to pursue his blueprint for providing $2.6 million in new incentives to entice broadband providers to put new equipment on existing towers to serve hundreds more customers by the end of this year.

But the broadband initiative has not always gone according to plan. Freedom Telecom Services, which the board selected in September 2017 to design and construct a fiber optic network, collapsed a few months later with no work done.

The county solicited new proposals and last January narrowed its choices for detailed designs to Omnipoint and Tenebris Fiber, a reincarnation of Freedom Telecom. The back and forth between county IT and procurement staff and the companies took longer than expected. After weighing the bidders’ financial strengths, the board rejected Tenebris and agreed to move forward with Data Stream.

Under the legal requirements for public-private partnerships like this one, the supervisors must make the full proposal for any comprehensive agreement available for public review 10 days before a public hearing, and the board cannot vote on a contract until 30 days after that public hearing.

Omnipoint and Tenebris, in their original designs, laid out plans for 130 miles of new fiber in the county. Will that be in the comprehensive agreement? “Whether it’s 130 miles, 160 miles or 10 miles, that remains to be seen,” said Gerhardt, an entrepreneur who built and sold his own successful international mail and package delivery business before entering public life.

“I never had any desire to run for office,” said Gerhardt. Already active in civic affairs, Gerhardt was persuaded by friends and his son to run against an incumbent in 2015. “I thought it was a good opportunity. There’s always something going on in the county that (ticks) you off and you think you can do it differently,” he said.

Gerhardt is unopposed for re-election on this year’s ballot but said that

Comcast declines to partner on broadband grant

Comcast will not partner with Fauquier County after all, to apply for a Virginia Telecommunication Initiative grant to bring broadband to Orleans.

“Comcast has decided that it is not a ‘viable business plan’ to partner with Fauquier County on Orleans, as there are not enough homes/subscribers to be lucrative,” Katie Heritage, the county’s deputy administrator, said.

The county received word of the decision on Aug. 15. “Needless to say, this is a big disappointment – especially since VATI required that we post notice on our intent to apply for the grant by Aug. 6,” Heritage said. “Obviously, a lot of folks from Orleans commended encouraging the application and will doubtlessly be disappointed.”

The county hoped to get $3 million through VATI, which has $19 million to subsidize construction costs and provide last-mile service to unserved areas. The county would have contributed $500,000 and Comcast would have put in another $500,000.

Supervisor Rick Gerhardt expressed disappointment and said this same scenario with Comcast had happened once before when the county asked it to partner on a state broadband grant application for Marshall.