Fauquier to apply for grant to bring broadband to Orlean

By James Ivancic

Fauquier County plans to apply for a state grant to support a planned expansion of broadband service to Orlean.

Deputy County Administrator Katie Heritage said the thinking at this stage in the process is to seek a $3 million Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development Telecommunications Initiative grant that will require the county to contribute $500,000 and Comcast to put in an additional $500,000.

“Comcast approached us and we identified Orlean as an unserved area,” said Heritage.

The county has a non-exclusive franchise agreement with Comcast.

“All providers are approaching counties” with which they have agreements to partner together and apply for a share of the total $19 million in state funding available, Heritage explained.

The grant program is designed to subsidize construction costs and provide last-mile service to unserved areas, according to the VDHCD website.

“It’s a win-win. We said, ‘Why not?’” said Heritage. “We could get $3 million by putting in 5 and Comcast putting in 5 to light up an area” with broadband, Heritage said.

Since Comcast service is fiber-based, it is likely the service to Orlean would involve laying fiber.

The county expects to file its grant application in September. It is currently seeking public comment on the proposed application. Comments will be received until the close of the business day on Aug. 16. Comments can be submitted to: Catherine Heritage, deputy county administrator, 10 Hotel St., Warrenton, Virginia, 20186. Her email is Katie.heritage@fauquiercounty.gov. Her phone number is 540-422-8005.

Supervisors put off public hearing on broadband

The Board of Supervisors has put off plans to hold a public hearing and possibly vote at Thursday’s monthly meeting on the proposals two companies have submitted to make broadband internet available throughout the county.

The county envisions spending $20 million over four years to speed a public-private solution to the problem that is acute in the most rural parts of Fauquier.

The afternoon meeting is closed since the supervisors will be discussing the financial proposals made by Tenebris Fiber and Data Stream Mobile Technologies (formerly Omnipoint Technology Partners) and discussing them “in an open session” and is still awaiting the county’s response to the last information it submitted in response to county questions, said Adam Noll, its chief commercial and development officer.

The supervisors solicited “conceptual” proposals last year and in November selected Tenebris and Omnipoint to present detailed plans.

The board’s timetable for a decision has been pushed back before. Supervisor Mary Leigh McDaniel, the vice chair, said in an interview that there are “a lot of moving parts on this thing. We’re trying to make sure we do the right thing here.”

County officials have said they are considering a “hybrid” solution to the broadband problem, meaning laying 130 miles of new fiber and building towers that can transmit broadband signals wirelessly to homeowners and businesses that have now only slow-speed access to the internet.

Tenebris Fiber is experienced at laying fiber while Data Stream Mobile already has a small contract with the county to install towers in communities including Casanova and Goldvein.

Tenebris has not been asked to participate in Thursday’s closed session and is still awaiting the county’s response to the last information it submitted in response to county questions, said Adam Noll, its chief commercial and development officer.

Bohler used the Spreiregen Plan and a new survey of Main Street as the basis for its draft engineer plans; after several versions, a final draft was submitted to the town on Aug. 2. Both the Spreiregen Plan and the current draft design both seek to “improve walkability, street-scaping and encourage a vibrant Main Street.”

While the designs are extremely similar, there are small design modifications that, the accompanying materials say, “are the product of 28 years of planning and engineering changes.”

The town’s Walkability Audit, and Complete Streets Report were also considered as Bohler completed the draft report.

Bohler’s draft plan for Main Street includes raised crosswalks to slow down traffic, bump outs (like the ones installed near Fifth Street last fall) and space for sidewalk dining. It also maps out an additional crosswalk near First Street.

A possible directional star design embedded in the road at Courthouse Square would provide visual interest.

The plan includes several features that would highlight Warrenton’s historical significance. Main Street between Second Street and Third Street would be repaved with brick, to mark the historic crossroads of the town. The two gateways to Old Town -- the intersection of Alexandria Pike and Main Street and the intersection of Calhoun and Main streets -- would feature mid-street signs to welcome visitors to Old Town. The permanent markers would also serve as traffic-calming features.

The resolution to apply for VDOT funding for Main Street improvements would be for funds of up to $950,000 through the VDOT FY2021-2022 Transportation Alternatives Program. The VDOT grant would require matching funds from the town, in an 80/20 split. VDOT’s portion would be 80 percent ($760,000), the town’s, 20 percent ($190,000).

Roundabout at Walker Drive and Lee Street

The application to request funds from VDOT’s Revenue Sharing Program for a full-size roundabout at the intersection of Lee Street, Walker Drive and Oliver City Drive would be for $1,400,000. This would require a 50/50 split, with the town providing $700,000.

The idea of a roundabout at the intersection has been around for years. In November 2018, Councilman Sean Polster (at large) confirmed, “The traffic warrants it.”

Safety improvements at Waterloo and Chestnut streets

Several options are being explored to improve car and pedestrian safety at Waterloo and Chestnut streets -- from adding sidewalks and crosswalks to changing the layout of Waterloo street and adding a median. The resolution the Town Council is looking at would submit an application to VDOT’s Revenue Sharing Program for a $100,000 grant. This grant would require at 50/50 split, which translates to a $50,000 contribution from the town of Warrenton.

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