

FiOS Feather In Richard's Cap

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By Benjamin Lanka

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People logging onto the Internet or watching television through Verizon FiOS should reserve a small thank-you for Mayor Graham Richard.

Because of work from the outgoing mayor, Fort Wayne has that technology. It wasn't by chance that Verizon chose to initially invest about \$75 million to wire Fort Wayne, New Haven and Hometown with fiber optic technology – dubbed FiOS by the company – making the community the first in the Midwest to get the service.

Verizon's network uses fiber-optic cable, which can carry massive amounts of information at the speed of light. Although fiber-optic lines are widely used in the industry, few companies invest to bring the lines to homes and businesses. AT&T, for instance, is building some fiber-optic networks that do not extend to customers' homes. Comcast's network carries signals on a combination of coaxial cable and fiber-optic cable.

The persistence and shared vision of Richard with the company helped bring that to Fort Wayne, according to community and company officials.

"It wouldn't have happened but for him," Deputy Mayor Mark Becker said.

When the company was deciding where to invest its technology across the country, Richard had several meetings with Chief Executive Ivan Seidenberg and other top executives to lobby the importance of the investment to Fort Wayne.

Bill Kula, Verizon spokesman, said it was rare for a mayor to share the same vision of the importance of the technology and understand so much about the specifics.

"He has a very passionate, enthusiastic, almost euphoric belief that innovation spurs growth in a community," Kula said. "We have attempted to pattern our relationship with other cities in the country after the model established in Fort Wayne."

Kula said the discussions with the mayor started in 2003 when the company had its annual shareholder meeting in Fort Wayne. The company then began building its fiber network in 2004 in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. This is the same time people became aware of the company's plans to roll out the network across the country.

He said the mayor spoke with Seidenberg on several occasions about how Fort Wayne would be a good place to invest, and there is no question the mayor's lobbying helped expedite the rollout of the investment in Fort Wayne.

"The mayor of Fort Wayne arguably has been one of if not the most supportive public figures in the nation of the innovation that Verizon sought to bring to town with its fiber-optic network," Kula said.

He said the company experienced roadblocks in other communities. For example, he said in Fort Wayne there were up to 200 crews installing the fiber network. Other similar-sized communities limited the number of crews to 30, delaying the installation.

Richard said getting the private investment from Verizon – and Comcast's broadband investments – will bring more value to the community over the coming decades than his other accomplishments.

Phil Laux, president of the Greater Fort Wayne Chamber of Commerce, said Fort Wayne is one of the smallest cities to receive the FiOS investment, thanks in part to many people, but especially Richard.

"Graham had a tremendous amount to do with getting FiOS into the community," he said.