

Article: Wiring West Virginia
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Carriers bringing service farther afield

Danese, Fayette County. Inwood, Berkeley County. Volga, Barbour County. Wheeling. Morgantown. Barboursville.

In 2007, more residents in all of these communities got high-speed Internet, thanks to Verizon West Virginia's digital subscriber line service expansions.

In 2008, Verizon and others have big plans for wiring West Virginia, including soon-to-be-released broadband coverage maps, but it has to be a team effort, said Lee Gierczynski, spokesman for Verizon West Virginia.

"It's really about getting all of us with a stake in the state's broadband future working together," he said.

In 2007, Verizon pledged to provide 100 new communities in the state with service and equip 260 remote facilities — mostly in rural areas — with DSL by the end of the year.

In August, the company invested more than \$650,000 to install more than 11 miles of fiber-optic cable between the company's New Martinsville central switching office and two stations along Proctors Ridge.

The following month, Verizon invested \$305,000 in fiber-optic cables and new telephone equipment for residents along W.Va. 2, south of Sistersville in Tyler County.

In October, a \$500,000 investment added new equipment and helped lay nearly 8 miles of fiber-optic cable from the company's central switching office in Fayetteville to locations in Beckwith and Oak Hill.

Also during 2007, the company upgraded phone lines for high-speed service in Franklin and Brandywine in Pendleton County; Martinsburg and Falling Waters; Canvas, near Summersville; Wheeling; and Danese.

Along with expanded service, Verizon became an early partner with Connected Nation, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit technology group.

Since August, Verizon, along with other high-speed Internet providers in the state, has helped Connected Nation map the state's broadband availability. The idea is to develop a comprehensive plan to provide high-speed service to rural areas.

About 70 percent of broadband providers in the state, including small entrepreneurs, have provided information, said Brian Mefford, chief executive officer of Connected Nation.

“In general, the response has been favorable,” he said. “It’s a process and takes a lot of back and forth.”

The data collected is fairly simple, Medford said: Where is broadband service available? In some cases, especially with wireless signals, engineers must study how far the signal reaches, he said.

The maps will help pinpoint gaps in coverage, topographic challenges and existing infrastructure, such as water towers, that can be used for high-speed Internet.

The preliminary maps should be complete this month and will be submitted to Gov. Joe Manchin, he said.

The public can give input, too, he said. Once the maps are released, citizens can visit www.connectednation.org and view the maps, he said. Also, people can register their interest in receiving service, he said.

From there, Connected Nation will help create business plans and models that high-speed internet providers can use to build their service, he said.

Connected Nation was born in Kentucky as Connect Kentucky nearly three years ago. Now, about 95 percent of the state’s residents have broadband coverage, Mefford said.

West Virginia can have similar results, he said, thanks in part to Manchin’s push for a wired state.

“I’ve been very impressed with Manchin and the state’s eagerness to address this challenge,” he said. “It’s a complicated issue that has lots of different challenges. For a governor to step up and say, ‘We are going to be a broadband leader,’ that should be commended.”

Along with an administrative push, Mefford said local communities and businesses should take ownership and responsibility for helping broadband deployment.

Gierczynski said that Verizon would continue to expand its broadband service, with a goal of serving 500 communities across the state by the end of 2008.

For Mefford, that is just what he wants to hear, especially in a rural environment.

“Broadband allows states and communities to really leapfrog. Once the investment is made, it really just opens up a lot of doors — education, health care and creating an environment that is inviting to business,” he said. “And if it can be done in the most rural parts of the county, it can be done anywhere.”

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