

The Daily Courier

Broadband project boosts Fayette connectivity

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UNIONTOWN — Fayette County will soon receive a major technology boost, thanks to COVID-19 relief funding.

Fayette County commissioners have awarded a Design Build Broadband Deployment contract to Vitalink LLC of Markleysburg, for installation of the necessary infrastructure to expand WiFi Internet capabilities countywide. The base bid contract, totaling \$5,375,540, requires all work to be completed by Dec. 15, and primarily focuses on identified broadband “hotspots” along the state Route 40 corridor.

The funding is Fayette County’s portion of the more than \$2 trillion economic relief package, known as the CARES Act, approved by the federal government earlier this year.

Financial consultant Sam Lynch said the state Department of Community and Economic Development will regularly monitor the county’s progress through monthly reports and other requirements. McMillen Engineering of Uniontown is also providing oversight of the project.

According to Vitalink's bid, crews will select a central location at each of the designated hotspots to maximize wireless signal. They will use existing buildings, poles and towers whenever possible to install wireless access points and antennas. New poles or towers will be installed when existing facilities are not available.

Commissioner Scott Dunn said expanding rural broadband has always been important, in order to make Fayette County competitive in attracting new residents and businesses.

"With the COVID crisis, this is even more evident as more people work remotely and kids are learning at home," Dunn said. "The benefits from the economic and educational perspectives will be far reaching and allow us to grow in the future."

County tourism is another business sector that will greatly benefit from the broadband expansion, Dunn added.

"I've long thought that our beautiful mountains, rivers and lakes can sell themselves with a little help from our visitors sharing pictures and posts on social media," he said.

Commissioner Vince Vicites said rural broadband expansion has been a top priority for Fayette County since 2016, with the commissioners regularly meeting with members of Congress and top Washington, D.C., officials, seeking support for the project.

"Rural broadband is the infrastructure of the future," Vicites said. "Without this infrastructure in place, Fayette County will not be able to progress and compete with other Pennsylvania counties or other states."

"Residents, schools, businesses, medical facilities and more all need broadband," he said.

“With access to rural broadband, Fayette County will position itself for future growth and prosperity. This is just the start of our efforts to ensure our citizens and businesses are connected to each other – and the world at large.”

Commissioner Dave Lohr said the project has been “a long time coming,” with the need for expanded internet access growing more pressing each day amid the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic.

He said educators, students and business owners are feeling the effects of that need.

“It’s so exciting when a project you’ve been working on finally becomes a reality. When I start talking about improving infrastructure, many people just tune out, but infrastructure is more important than architecture; it’s critical to our viability as a place to live and work,” Lohr said.

“Business can’t compete without reliable infrastructure; improving it creates economic development, puts people to work and enhances local communities. Yes, we need roads, bridges, water and sewer lines, but we also need to make sure that all of Fayette County has access to broadband.”

Lohr said Fayette County is now “on the cutting edge” and “setting the standard” for rural broadband.

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