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Ohio Middle Mile Consortium partner awarded \$30 million for broadband stimulus grant



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Written by Tyler O'Neal

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Com Net, Inc., a founding member of the Ohio Middle Mile Consortium, has been awarded federal stimulus funding that will add almost 700 new miles of broadband fiber to rural and underserved communities throughout western Ohio.

"This is a great day for Ohio. Comprehensive broadband services for the state are vital to enhancing education, retraining our displaced workforce and preparing our future workforce to drive Ohio economic development," said Ohio Board of Regents Chancellor Eric D. Fingerhut, who had called on the Ohio Academic Resources Network (OARnet), the technology operations arm of the University System of Ohio, to coordinate a unified approach for federal stimulus broadband applications.

OMMC partners Com Net, Inc., Horizon Telcom, OneCommunity and OARnet formed a public-private partnership to create a comprehensive statewide plan to expand broadband infrastructure to the underserved and unserved areas of the state. This plan will focus on community anchor institutions such as schools, hospitals, public safety and local governments to ensure the development of an affordable and sustainable broadband program.

In March 2010, the OMMC members submitted applications to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) for the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) to develop a Comprehensive Community Infrastructure (CCI). BTOP funding was established as part of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA), better known as the federal stimulus package.

As part of its first wave of announcements, the NTIA awarded \$30 million in federal stimulus funding to:
– GigEPAC Ohio Middle Mile Consortium, led by Com Net in western Ohio

The project submitted by Horizon in southeastern Ohio, "Connecting Appalachian Ohio Middle Mile Consortium," is pending, as is the project "Transforming NE Ohio from Rust Belt to Tech Powerhouse-An Ohio Middle Mile Consortium Project," led by OneCommunity in northeastern Ohio.

"This infrastructure will support new initiatives for reaching Ohioans and promoting creation and retention of jobs in economically distressed areas of the state," said Pankaj Shah, executive director, OARnet, "while maintaining OARnet's core mission of serving the higher education institutions' research and education needs. Fifty percent of OARnet's bandwidth will always be available for our higher education consortium."

In the context of today's award, Com Net's project will provide connectivity to its high capacity fiber network for as many as 880 community anchor institutions, including K-12, state and local government, public safety, libraries and community support organization facilities.

This project complements OARnet's statewide network by increasing the middle mile connection points (points of presence, or "PoPs") from the current 14 to 25. This expansion reduces the "last mile" costs for broadband services to community anchor institutions throughout the state.

"The OMMC projects leverage the current networks operated by the OMMC partners to deliver maximum benefit for the cost," said Bill McKell, Horizon CEO. "We will expand the middle mile access for local and statewide networks, resulting in a broader range of affordable broadband services to our clients. This will, in turn, provide enhanced and extended broadband Internet, video and voice services to Ohio community anchors."

Com Net's CEO Tim Berelsman added, "Com Net was founded in the early 1990s by 22 of Ohio's rural independent operating companies to provide collectively what could not be accomplished individually. Com Net pooled its assets with those of its owner-partners to deliver advanced services to the rural communities that they served.

"Our history of cooperation and open communications allowed us to quickly identify with the vision of the OMMC and to understand the benefit for not only Northwest Ohio, but all of Ohio, by bringing our existing partners with us in collaborating with ZAYO Bandwidth, OARnet, Horizon and OneCommunity in the spirit of the ARRA BTOP application process," Berelsman said.

In keeping with the objective of the stimulus package to revitalize communities, the OMMC projects will stimulate the demand for broadband, spur economic growth, and create jobs.

"A robust, comprehensive broadband network is vital for Ohio to transition from a traditional industrial economy to a global technology and advanced manufacturing economy," said Mark Ansboury, OneCommunity's senior vice president and chief technology officer.

All of the OMMC proposals use an open access model. Any provider will be able to access the fiber at reasonable rates and terms. For more information on the Ohio Middle Mile Consortium, visit <http://www.ohiomiddlemile.org>.