



Work starts on Horizon Internet upgrades

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Horizon CEO Bill McKeel speaks Monday morning about the importance of broadband cable in Appalachia during a project kickoff event in Logan. / Loren Genson/Gazette



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LOGAN -- The long-anticipated project to ensure southern and central Ohioans will have better access to broadband cable officially began Monday morning.

Horizon, a Chillicothe company, began installing cable lines in Logan to mark the start of the "Connecting Appalachia" project, which will provide high-capacity fiber-optic broadband services with speeds up to 10 gigabits per second to 34 Appalachian Ohio counties.

The project was made possible through a \$66.4 million Broadband Technologies Opportunity Program grant funded with stimulus money. Horizon provided 30 percent of the project costs, bringing the total project cost to \$94.9 million.

As Horizon crews began connecting cables on overhead telephone lines Monday morning, Horizon employees, business leaders and members of government came out to support the start of the historic project with a ceremony in Logan at the Family Health Care Center.

"If we want to promote economic development throughout Ohio, we need to ensure that businesses and households have broadband access," said Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, who sent a letter to be read at the ceremony. "Ohio's rural communities have been overlooked for too long, but today's groundbreaking is great news for southeastern Ohio."

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A representative from Rep. Bob Gibbs' office also read a statement from the congressman, a Lakeville Republican who represents Ohio's 18th District. Although Gibbs criticized the project's use of stimulus funds during his campaign last year, he stood behind it in his remarks on Monday, saying in a statement "for too long, the geographic conditions of Appalachia made it too easy to forget."

The project started on Monday is part of a statewide public-private partnership called the Middle Mile Consortium. The goal is to connect health care facilities, education institutions, industrial parks and county public safety answering points to higher-speed Internet.

Connecting Appalachia will connect 212 health care facilities, 25 community colleges, 15 universities, 231 K-12 schools, 34 county public safety answering points, 32 Multi-Agency Radio Communications System towers and 34 industrial parks. Ross, Vinton, Fayette, Jackson, Scioto and Pike counties are among the 34 counties to get a high-speed cable infrastructure boost from the project.

Local providers of high-speed cable can then use the expanded infrastructure to run lines to other homes and businesses in the area not served by high-speed cable.

Bill Rhinehart, the executive director of the Logan-Hocking Chamber of Commerce and a Ross County native, said he was pleased to see the project get under way in Logan. He said he believes strongly in the strength of Horizon, which is locally owned by the McKell family.

"We've been waiting on this for several years," said Rhinehart. "I know this project is in good hands, because I know the McKell family, and I know they will do a good job."

In 2009, Horizon connected hospital systems in southern Ohio through the Southern Ohio Health Care Network and has infrastructure in place connecting hospitals in 13 of the 34 counties in Connecting Appalachia.

"That project was the first, and when stimulus funds became available to expand that into what we're doing here (with Connecting Appalachia), we applied for it, and we were fortunate enough to receive it," Davies said. "We're really proud. It's a great day for southern Ohio."