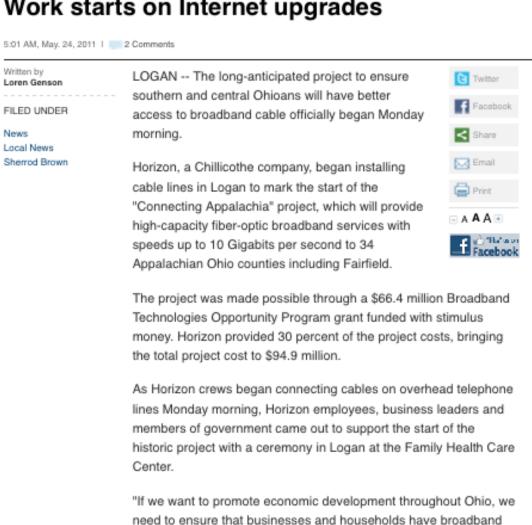


Work starts on Internet upgrades



A representative from Rep. Bob Gibbs' office also read a statement from the congressman, a Lakeville Republican who represents

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."

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."

Horizon CEO Bill McKell called the project a "great beginning" and said their broadband lines will be open to other carriers to extend additional lines to reach rural homes and businesses close to the lines Horizon is installing.

"There are a number of carriers we'll work with to make sure we extend broadband cable to that final mile," McKell said.

Horizon Public Relations Manager Randy Davies said the goal is to have the backbone of the infrastructure complete by the end of the year, and have all the sites connected by July of 2013.

Davies said the project got a boost from Gibbs' predecessor Zack Space, a Democrat, who championed bringing broadband to rural communities as part of his economic development and job creation strategy. Space supported the efforts of the Southern Ohio Health Care Network to improve health care by connecting southern Ohio health care facilities to broadband cable. 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."