

Biz groups: Faster Internet good for commerce

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The benefits may not be fully clear yet, but local officials agree that a new broadband cable in the Albemarle will be good for economic development.

The faster and more powerful Internet service gets, the better for businesses and residents, schools and public facilities, officials agree.

“I can’t think of a company that doesn’t want the fastest broadbanding that is available,” said Currituck’s Economic Development Director Peter Bishop.

Camden’s Economic Development Commission is already looking at its options for taking advantage of the new service. A top priority will be getting high-speed service to the county’s new Eco-Industrial Park on U.S. Highway 158, said EDC members.

Economic Developer Charlie Bauman said offering that service will be as important as providing water and sewer at the eco-park.

“This is key for the development of the park,” said Bauman.

Microelectronics Center of North Carolina is extending the broadband cable as part of a federally- and state-funded project to provide better computer access to underserved schools. The cable’s path along mostly major highways will also offer broadband access to libraries, hospitals, government buildings and military installations. Work in the region has already begun and is scheduled to be completed by the end of March.

Once MCNC finishes its work, private telecommunications providers are expected to tap into the broadband line to offer services to residential and business customers. Broadband offers faster service and greater computer capabilities by adding greater band width.

Albemarle Hospital

already has broadband capabilities, but the new technology could make things better, says Albemarle Health’s Chief Communications Officer Steve Clark.

Albemarle Health already uses existing fiber optic cables to network Albemarle Health services across the region, said Clark.

What the new broadband line offers is a chance to get “ring technology.” Under the existing system, Albemarle Health can lose connection to its regional partners in Kitty Hawk or Greenville if the existing fiber optic cable is cut. With the broadband cable, the connection can be re-routed so that the hospital’s service connection is not lost, said Clark.

Patients and doctors would also benefit from the upgrade. Some doctors living in rural areas outside where broadband service is offered are not able to access medical images at home. Instead, precious time is lost when doctors must drive to the hospital to access the records. Extending broadband service to outlying areas could solve that problem, said Clark.

With broadband capabilities, Albemarle Health could also offer an interactive site where patients can access medical records and talk to physicians electronically. All that data would overload the existing system, but broadband is capable of handling all that information, said Clark. To make it work, both the patients and Albemarle Health need broadband services.

Not all businesses and homes will have the advantage of being in the broadband cable’s path, which could lessen their chances of getting faster, more powerful service. It’s not easy to know how much those businesses may miss out because many already have high-speed Internet service.

Two commercial sections of highway in Pasquotank County will be outside the new broadband cable’s route.

For example, Halstead Boulevard Extended, which includes much of Elizabeth City’s newest commercial development, including the Walmart Supercenter, is not part of the broadband route. Neither is a section of Hughes Boulevard from its intersection with Halstead Boulevard to Elizabeth Street.

Commercial areas in other counties are also bypassed.

For instance, the new Currituck Community Park and commerce park on U.S. 158 are outside the broadband route. The site will eventually be home to College of The Albemarle’s new Aviation and Technology Training Center.

In Camden, all of U.S. 158 from the causeway to Belcross could be outside the broadband’s path. Neither would it pass by the Eco-Industrial Park on U.S. Highway 17.

The existing Internet service varies in these areas, but broadband could offer new capabilities if it becomes available.

Local officials in Pasquotank, Camden, Currituck, Perquimans and Chowan counties say they will be studying the best way to take advantage of a new broadband cable being installed in the region.

Many are asking how counties can encourage private providers to provide service to customers in more out-of-the-way locations.

Camden's EDC is already considering one option — offering providers access to water towers and other tall structures. The towers can be used for wireless transmitters to reach areas now without broadband service, said one telecommunications expert working with MCNC.

Elizabeth City has already checked into how much it would cost to extend the new broadband line that falls a couple of miles short of the Elizabeth City Municipal Airport and aviation park. Wayne Harris, director of the Albemarle Economic Development Commission, said future plans for ECSU's School of Aviation Science makes that access even more important.