

## Other broadband beneficiaries not yet known

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Who will be the winners after a new path for broadband Internet service is built in the region remains, at least for local officials, a question that's yet to be answered.

It's obvious that schools and health care facilities, colleges and libraries will benefit from the new \$144 million fiber optic cable line, which is being funded with federal stimulus money and state Golden LEAF funds.

Public facilities in so-called "underserved" areas are the direct target of the project, which because wider bandwidth is used, will improve their access to high-speed Internet service.

It remains to be seen, however, what other private businesses and residential customers may benefit from the project.

Once the private, non-profit organization MCNC extends fiber optic cable lines across the Albemarle, other companies like Century Link and Verizon will have a chance to tap on.

Those companies would pay to extend lines from the "trunk" MCNC is building to nab new customers or upgrade existing ones.

The question remains if private companies will decide to pay for costly extensions from the MCNC line. The new cable will definitely make offering that service in the region more feasible than before, said Kurt Frenzel, a telecommunications analyst working with MCNC to market the new fiber optic cable.

The project paid to get the fiber optic cable to the region; now companies will be weighing the cost of extending lines beyond that, said Frenzel.

Most likely, the homes and businesses closest to the MCNC trunk will have the best chance of getting new service because the cost to extend lines would be less.

Another question will be who wants and needs the faster, more powerful Internet service.

In Currituck County, for example, high-speed Internet is already available to many residents and businesses, said Economic Developer Peter Bishop.

He doesn't expect the new Currituck Community Park and commerce park nearby will suffer even though they're both out of the path of the MCNC line.

Businesses and government buildings already have high-speed Internet service, and Bishop isn't sure how much better service would be with the new cable.

The county will keep watch on how much better service gets. If there's a big difference, the county may seek connections to the MCNC line, Bishop said.

"It's something we will certainly consider ... we will have to look at the benefits and the cost," said Bishop.

Apparently, counties and cities will have to rely on a private third company to extend services.

A newly approved state law limits counties and cities from directly tapping into the MCNC line and providing their own Internet services.

Some officials are concerned that underserved pockets in their counties will still be without high-speed service.

"A city is prohibited from providing services even in areas underserved by traditional providers," said Wayne Harris, director of the Albemarle Economic Development Commission.

There may be ways of working around the law, however.

Some officials in the region have been exploring the possibility of creating a broadband cooperative, similar to electric cooperatives formed in the 1930s, said Harris. Like the electric cooperative, the broadband cooperatives could provide service to rural areas that are underserved by private companies, he said.

Other options may also be available for counties in the region, said Frenzel with ECC Technologies in Raleigh.

Frenzel suggested counties map where high-speed Internet services already exist and survey customers to find out if better service is wanted or needed. The information could be valuable when the county begins negotiating with companies about expanding their services, he said.

"You need to have a blueprint of what's out there," said Frenzel.

In a presentation to Camden's Economic Development Council earlier this week, Frenzel said counties may also encourage companies to extend service by offering them access to water towers and other tall county-owned structures for wireless service.

The towers may allow companies to provide services to areas that would otherwise be ineligible for better services because of cost, he said.