

Broadband path becomes clearer

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The path toward quicker, more powerful Internet access in the Albemarle is taking a somewhat circuitous route.

A private, not-for-profit operator is extending broadband cables in the region, mostly along major highways. But in some places, the lines will be taking a less direct route.

For example, the cable's path in Pasquotank County will mostly follow U.S. Highways 17 and 158. But it also zigzags past the W.C. Witherspoon Memorial Library downtown and veers down Water Street toward Elizabeth City State University.

The paths through Camden, Currituck, and Chowan counties also have their jaunts down some side streets.

The roundabout routes can be explained.

In many cases, Microelectronics Center of North Carolina is simply running cable past target customers — essentially schools, hospitals, libraries, government buildings and military installations.

The \$144 million MCNC project is designed to expand computer capabilities to “underserved” schools across the region and the state. The project is being funded with \$108 million in federal stimulus money, \$24 million in state Golden LEAF funds and \$12 million in private donations, including \$8 million from the MCNC endowment. The “round two” part of the overall project, which includes the Albemarle region, is expected to be three times the size of the “round one” project, according to MCNC. It will build 1,200 miles of broadband infrastructure through 79 counties.

Although the broadband line is being built primarily to accommodate educational institutions, other businesses will be able to tap into the extension once it's installed.

Besides the fact it's being built near schools, the bends in the route can also be attributed to MCNC's attempts to cut costs.

In many cases, the broadband cable will follow natural gas lines, said one consultant hired by MCNC to help counties study broadband capabilities. MCNC is saving money by using existing natural gas easements, rather than buying its own land, said Kurt Frenzel, telecommunications agent with ECC Technologies in Raleigh.

Local officials are still trying to figure out who else — besides the target customers — may benefit from the new broadband “trunk.”

On Tuesday, Camden’s Economic Development Commission was weighing the county’s options for extending broadband services to its new Eco-Industrial Park on U.S. Highway 17. The eco-park is 7.5 miles away from MCNC’s broadband path on U.S. 158 near Morgan’s Corner.

Elizabeth City has also been studying the cost of expanding services to its municipal airport and aviation park that is a few miles from the broadband trunk.

Connecting businesses and residents to that trunk can be expensive, said Frenzel. Extending the line one mile along utility poles could cost an estimated \$35,000 to \$45,000. Installing the line underground could double or triple that cost.

Some companies may be willing to pay the cost of extending the lines to get more customers, Frenzel said.

Frenzel expects firms like Verizon and AT&T will spring to action once the lines are installed. Work in the region is scheduled for completion by March 2013, according to MCNC’s online timetable.

With the new broadband trunk in place, companies will be refiguring the cost of adding new customers who may have been too expensive to reach before.

Exactly where new service will be available still remains uncertain. Mostly likely, businesses and houses closest to the trunk will have the best chance of being offered new services.

According to MCNC’s website, those proposed routes are described as the following:

Pasquotank

Plans for the cable line run along U.S. 158 from Gates County to Morgan’s Corner. From there, it will turn south on U.S. Highway 17 and continue on the highway, except for a short detour along Lake Drive at the U.S. 17/158 overpass. From there, it will go along U.S. 17 business past College of The Albemarle and Albemarle Hospital to Elizabeth Street.

From Elizabeth Street the route zigzags to the W.C. Witherspoon Memorial Library along Harney and West Colonial streets. Then it turns south on Martin Luther King Drive to East Ehringhaus Street where it connects to Water Street, Southern Avenue and then Parkview Drive. The line will pass Elizabeth City State University then circle behind Edgewood Shopping Center before coming back to Parkview and heading down Edgewood Drive and Halstead Boulevard toward U.S. 17 in the direction of Hertford and Edenton.

Camden

The fiber optic cable will cross over the Pasquotank River into Camden County at Shipyard Road near Bell Farm, according to the site plan for the MCNC Golden LEAF Rural Broadband initiative.

The cable will run along Shipyard Road until it reaches N.C. Highway 343 at the county's school administration building and then turn east on Scotland Road toward Camden Middle School. County Planning Director Dan Porter said he understands the project will also include a spur on N.C. 343 southward toward Grandy Elementary School. County officials are hoping the spur will be extended toward the Camden Historic Courthouse to the intersection at U.S. 158 and Camden High School.

The cable's path on Scotland Road will continue to the Camden-Currituck county line where the road turns into N.C. Highway 34.

Currituck

From Camden, the fiber optic cable will continue on N.C. 34 past mostly farmland in Shawboro and up to Sligo before turning south on N.C. 168 toward the Outer Banks. The line will continue down N.C. 168 past the Currituck Courthouse, the Currituck County Schools administrative office and a few schools. Before the Coinjock bridge, the cable will veer off U.S. 158 along Worth Guard Road and Waterlily Road before joining U.S. 158 once again. Close to Grandy, the line takes another dip, this time onto Augusta Drive and Carolina Club Drive, circling The Carolina Club. The line will run south on Grandy Road before changing direction at Fisher Landing Road and out to U.S. 158 again. From there, the line would follow U.S. 158 to point Harbor and across the Bonner Bridge.