Rush is on to wire state

ConnectKentucky aims to have broadband across commonwealth by year's end

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The push is on to get broadband coverage over the entire state by the end of the year.
ConnectKentucky, which is charged with the job, is focusing its efforts on Simpson and Butler counties – which still have big gaps in coverage, according to Jeff Rose, project manager for the West Region and director for program development for ConnectKentucky.

"We are in Operation **Home Stretch**," he said.

Rose said the organization hopes to be able to fulfill substantially the goal of 100 percent availability coverage or have projects in the works to provide that coverage to meet Gov. Ernie Fletcher's Prescription for Innovation.

He estimates that about 95 percent of the state has coverage, with about 60 percent availability in Simpson and Butler counties.

ConnectKentucky, a public-private nonprofit organization, doesn't actually provide the broadband Internet service, but rather it helps communities in their efforts to get the service.
In some places, that has meant setting up local organizations to supply the service, Rose said. In Ohio County, the government is using Coal Severance Funds to install a wireless network on water towers and cell phone towers in the county.

The organization has helped assemble a small group of local leaders in Butler and Simpson counties to focus on educating people about broadband Internet and "highlighting and building an awareness" of potential users.

"Then we have talked about models that other communities are using," Rose said.
ConnectKentucky has done a vertical assessment of both counties to identify cell phone towers, water towers and other fixtures, such as grain silos, which might be used for equipment for a wireless system, he said.

"We are trying to reduce the risk a company might have in coming into a community," he said. "We certainly hope that there are going to be companies willing to invest."

Kirk Atkinson, an assistant professor of computer information systems at Western Kentucky University, lives in Butler County and has spearheaded the committee there.

Land-based broadband service is not available in the eastern part of Butler County, Atkinson said.

Dial-up would have been crippling for someone used to dealing with massive amounts of computer-based information and who was used to the speedy service available on campus, such as himself.

"I was fortunate that I could afford to go the satellite option, but it's not real viable for most people," Atkinson said. "It's pricey for what you get."

The equipment costs between $300 and $500 to install and the lowest monthly service available is about $50. It's $70 for unlimited service, he said.

"And it's not really that fast," Atkinson said.

So Atkinson thinks it's important to provide an affordable option for faster Internet service, something he thinks many Butler Countians desire.

But Atkinson questions whether they can begin the process of getting a provider before the end of the year.

"We have talked at different levels about what the county would have to do to come up with the capital to start a system," he said. "We have looked for grants and loans ... but fiscal court would have to be involved in that."

Atkinson said with the county already looking at revenue issues for the services it provides, it would be a tough sell to taxpayers to potentially take on debt, even though subscribers would ultimately pay for such a system.

"So I just don't know if it's possible before the end of the year," he said.

While ConnectKentucky paints a fairly rosy picture about existing available broadband coverage, Atkinson has some questions about the actual availability.

For instance, in the southern part of Butler County, it is supposed to be already available.
"But I know several people there who can't access it," he said.

And even in instances were broadband or satellite Internet is available, Atkinson said it must be affordable.

As for Simpson County, Rose said the service now is a fairly small circle around the corporate limits.

"There is an industrial park on the north side looking for a bigger pipe (to carry more bandwidth)," Rose said. "There is some limited coverage now, so that is one thing that Judge-Executive (Jim) Henderson is looking at improving."

Rose said as people begin using the Internet more, they will demand more bandwidth.
"So it is going to be a moving target," he said. "Just like we have a great interstate road system that needs expanding because we have more and more traffic, it will need to be expanded, too."

Information on each of Kentucky's counties including the Strategic Technology Plan is available at connectkentucky.org/localinfo/. An interactive broadband map is available at connectkentucky.org/Mapping/.

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