



Bedford schools cleared for faster Internet

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BEDFORD — Three Bedford County elementary schools were cleared Monday to each receive Broadband Internet service through wireless communication facilities on each campus.

After holding separate public hearings, the Bedford County Board of Supervisors approved special-use permits for Conterra Ultra Broadband, a North Carolina-based firm working with the county's public school division to install the facilities.

The permits allow the firm to place a 111-foot-tall tower at Boonsboro Elementary School, an 80-foot-tall tower at Huddleston Elementary School and a 76-foot-tall tower at Body Camp Elementary School. The overall goal is to connect the entire school division under the same network, said Jonathan Yates, a representative of the firm.

"What we're trying to do is get the students of Bedford County equivalent with the rest of the country (in terms of Internet service)," Yates told supervisors.

The county has an 80-foot height requirement for towers but made an exception in the case of Boonsboro Elementary School. Yates stated in the firm's application the height was necessary to reach the needed signal.

Conterra has networks in 16 states and serves eight Virginia counties, Yates said. The firm has nearly 100 networks in place, he said.

Edward Hoisington, the school division's director of technology and media, said the towers would improve the three schools' Internet speed from 1.5 megabytes per second to 100 per second. Hoisington said they also allow the schools to keep pace with others in the area of online testing.

The schools' initiative comes at a time when county officials are also exploring options to expand broadband service.

Currently the county is in an "information-gathering stage," said Assistant County Administrator Frank Rogers.

The area's topography and landscape presents challenges in extending service.

"There's a large area of the county that is without sufficient high-speed Internet connectivity to meet a lot of the demands of citizens and the growing needs of business," said Rogers.

However, since some of the coverage area is not densely populated, he said, capital infrastructure costs would be harder for the county to recoup.

"We're trying to devise a way to facilitate the provision of service in that environment."

Broadband has tremendous potential to enable "good sound business growth," which is why he said the county economic development authority is taking part in the research.

The authority recently formed a subcommittee to review the county's options and likely give the authority recommendations on what options to pursue.

An alternative, Rogers said, is consideration of the formation of a wireless broadband authority.

Several counties like King George and Pulaski have such authorities, which may be eligible for tobacco commission grants and other grant money.

The county, in response to a proposed federal economic stimulus package that is still under debate, also recently submitted an \$8 million project estimate called the "Last Mile Broadband Initiative" to the state.

John Sharp, the board's chairman, said he spoke recently with Rep. Tom Perriello, D-5th District, about the stimulus package and came away with the understanding that it will address rural broadband initiatives. "Hopefully we'll see something from that," Sharp said.

In other business:

The board approved, with Supervisor Dale Wheeler absent, a change within its payment method for appointed members of boards and commissions. Under the new policy, any serving member of the county's handful of appointed bodies would get issued W-2 tax forms and be considered employees rather than receiving 1099 forms that recognize them as independent contractors. The method also pays those serving a fixed monthly income rather than receiving reimbursement based on meeting attendance. County Administrator Kathleen Guzi said the boards have 90 percent attendance or higher and do work aside from attending meetings. Appointed officials will now have taxes taken from their pay under the new policy, which is why Guzi recommended the monthly reimbursement. "This would help to offset the decrease in payments due to taxes," she said in a county memo. The IRS advised the change.