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Three-county plan for broadband presented

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Leadership in Vinton County gathered at the Herbert Wescoat Memorial Library on Thursday to hear Hocking County 911 Director Brent Runge present a three-county goal and plan of bringing countywide broadband Internet service to the area.

The Vinton County Broadband Committee, an off-shoot of the Vinton County Chamber of Commerce's Future Focus 2010 Committee, recently gained permission from the Vinton County Commissioners to join Hocking and Perry Counties in a non-profit organization called FastOhio. The non-profit is geared toward securing the ways and means to tapping into a statewide Internet backbone system called the Next Gen Network, formerly the Third Frontier Network, and implementing a local network to broadcast bandwidth via Wimax, a hearty microwave signal that is able to be sent over, around and through line-of-sight impediments.

"It's the largest fiber optic network in the country," Runge said of Next Gen. "Let's build off an infrastructure that can be used by the counties that's state funded."

Runge described a spoke and hub configuration to distribute the broadband Internet signal that would originate from the statewide system at a location close to Logan and the FastOhio office. According to Runge's plan, the signal would be sent to a series of locations dotted around Logan, connecting all of the locations and resembling a wagon wheel. McArthur would be connected to the local network by one of the "spoke" locations. From McArthur, the local broadband committee could conceivably institute their own network and relay the signal over all of Vinton County.

In Hocking, Runge plans to use the MARCS towers, which are located all over the county, to relay signal and blanket the area with usable broadband Internet service. The MARCS (Multi-Agency Radio Communication System) towers are operated by the Ohio Office of Information Technologies and provide voice and data coverage to subscribers, usually public safety, health and law enforcement agencies.

The local broadband committee, chaired by Carol Porter, is investigating a similar plan. Porter said Commissioner Tom Morgan sent a letter to Gov. Ted Strickland requesting use of the MARCS towers in Vinton. Morgan, who attended Thursday's meeting, confirmed the letter, adding that he asked permission to use the towers at no cost to the county.

But, plans to tap into Next Gen and relay the signal all over Hocking, Vinton and Perry, depend on the Ohio Broadband Council, a state committee put in place by Strickland to recommend the allocation of \$20 million that has been promised to bring broadband to all of Ohio.

"The key is a stabilized program at the state level," Runge said. According to the Hocking 911 director, no money will be released to aid in local funding until the state government has set its priorities for broadband. Before Vinton and FastOhio can begin to build their proposed spoke and hub configuration to distribute internet signal, Runge said the state must have its own plans in place that will allow access to Next Gen and provide a funding mechanism.

As the local broadband committee and the rest of FastOhio await the Ohio Broadband Council's recommendations to Strickland, they will continue to lay out plans for broadband implementation.

"We're at the stage where we want to make sure everybody's up to speed," local broadband committee member David Boothe said, adding that it was critical that the local plan to implement broadband incorporate all county agencies' needs and be prepared when state money is ready to be handed out.

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