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Officials to add more towers for ConnectGRADD

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Officials from the Evansville company building the ConnectGRADD high-speed Internet system said Wednesday they have plans to expand the system's reach over the next six to eight months.

The extended coverage will make the service available to thousands of rural customers in the seven-county Green River Area Development District service area.

Right now, there are 1,160 customers on the ConnectGRADD system in the seven counties that partnered to build the system -- but at least 4,200 customers are needed to pay back loans the counties took out for the project.

Officials with Norlight Communications addressed the ConnectGRADD board Wednesday at the GRADD office in Owensboro.

ConnectGRADD was conceived as a way to expand high-speed Internet service to the rural areas of the region. To finance the project, fiscal courts in Daviess, McLean, Henderson, Hancock, Ohio, Union and Webster counties put up \$1.2 million in either coal severance dollars or county funds, and the counties received authorization for up to \$1.1 million in loans from Kentucky Infrastructure Authority.

In August, the system also received a \$202,000 grant from Delta Regional Authority.

The GRADD district is also awaiting word on whether it will receive federal stimulus funds earmarked for high-speed Internet expansion.

Phil Lambert, Norlight's business development manager, said the company has already met its contracted goal of installing signal transmission towers in the seven counties.

"Contractually, we had committed to doing 35" towers, Lambert said. As of today, 37 towers are online and open to customers, while three towers are undergoing testing.

Lambert said the remaining funds will allow the company to put transmission equipment on 17 additional towers and water tanks this year.

"The bulk of them we hope to have done in the next six to seven months," Lambert said. "...When we add the 17, there will be 57 (sites), without any stimulus funding."

Lambert said the 57 sites should allow ConnectGRADD to meet its 4,200-customer threshold. Joey Randolph, Norlight's product manager, said the number of people who could sign up for the system would greatly exceed 4,200.

"Our expectation is 15 percent to 20 percent of people who can get the service will sign up," Randolph said. "We're trying to get to 20,000 households (that could connect). That's why we feel we need to get the (number of) towers up by one-third."

Randolph told the board: "Geographically, I would anticipate the coverage is 50 percent to 60 percent of the counties ... What we need to try to do is get that to 70 to 80 percent and get out to people where there is the most demand."

The cost of installing many of the additional towers planned for this year is listed as GRADD's match on the organization's application for stimulus funds. GRADD is applying for \$2.098 million in

stimulus funds. The application calls for the local agency to put up 20 percent in matching funds.

Because the planned towers are listed as the match on the application, Lambert said officials couldn't proceed on work until they received a decision on the stimulus grant.

"There are only four sites we can actually build until we hear" if GRADD will receive stimulus dollars, Lambert said. Officials will need to receive official word on the stimulus grant in the next four to six weeks if Norlight is to have the additional towers done within eight months, Lambert said.

Randolph said later work could begin on all the towers even without notification on the stimulus grant, if the ConnectGRADD board authorizes Norlight to do the work. Randolph said the stimulus funds are not needed to build the 17 towers.

If stimulus dollars are received, 11 more transmission sites will be installed, bringing the total to 68 across the seven counties.

So far, all of the money used on the project has come from the counties.

"We haven't (used) any money as of yet" from the Kentucky Infrastructure Authority loan, Daviess County Judge-Executive Reid Haire said. "We have no debt service."

Any stimulus funding received would decrease the amount of KIA money needed for the project.

Tom Massie, GRADD's information technology manager, said he recently surveyed ConnectGRADD customers and found people were satisfied with the service.

"Of the 15 I talked to, they were very satisfied, even with the customer service," Massie said. Haire said a broader, "formalized" survey of customers should be conducted later.

"From our standpoint, it would be beneficial to know what kind of reception (customers) are getting," Haire said.

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