

4-11-11

Foothills Broadband Supporters,

I keep trying to wait until I have definitive information to share before I post this communication about the status of bringing broadband to unserved areas of the Foothills. My problem is that the next and best piece of information is always just around the corner and, in the meantime, you are being left in the dark.

The short story is that we are in the middle of a very complex process and we still have reason to hope.

The federal government understands that access to broadband is vital to the economic development, education, health and safety of rural America. 97% of Americans currently have access to broadband. Many of us don't. Several parts of east Whatcom County meet the definition of being very difficult to serve. Our population is sparse and spread out, our terrain is challenging. Bringing affordable, reliable and expandable broadband to those who are still unable to access high speed internet is our challenge.

Here is our current status. As was previously announced, federal stimulus funding has been obtained to bring fiber from Deming to Kendall and up to the new East County Resource Center. The question of who will be responsible for hanging that fiber is more up in the air than we previously thought, and that may delay the process, but the fiber is coming. We expect it to arrive sometime in 2012. Right now, the plan calls for fiber to be brought to Maple Falls as well. Those of us working most closely on this project are trying to change that. Many more people can be served if we trade that last bit of fiber for a wireless system that will serve homes and businesses from Kendall to Glacier and up Silver Lake Road.

Wireless service can reach homes that are not in close proximity to a cable. By tapping into the fiber in Kendall, we can also build a system that will offer enough speed to allow the downloading of videos (this is important for business and education as well as entertainment) and be expanded as future needs dictate. Many thanks are due to the internet service provider PogoZone for the time they volunteered to help us design a system that would meet our specifications.

We are still working to obtain permission to use a key tower site and arrange the funding that our community will be required to contribute to make our wireless plan work. This and many smaller details must be locked in by April 30th to keep the plan moving forward. Whatcom PUD, County Council members and the County Executive's office are all being extremely helpful - but we are still holding our breath and keep our fingers crossed as we charge ahead.

As you can imagine, working with federal grant requirements is a complex and arduous task. The Port of Bellingham is working on a plan to help us pay a Coordinator, for a few months, to attend to the many details of this project. Contract details are still being negotiated. This position is also expected to be responsible for working on additional projects to expand broadband access in the Foothills.

Russ Angus, Jeremy Standen, Carole MacDonald, Phil Cloward and the Foothills Chamber of Commerce deserve our thanks for their help in moving the project forward. We have overcome many obstacles to get the project this far. We are still struggling to clear the last few hurdles. It's worth the effort because... Our community will be what we make of it.

Linda Dorsett