



High-Speed Internet Access is a Necessity for Oconee

At some point in the past few decades, high-speed internet access stopped being a luxury and became a necessity. Articles abound that discuss the ways in which the future of the workforce, the way we learn and research information, and even our social interactions rely on broadband access.

In the 1990s, a household might have had one landline phone and a self installed antenna on the roof. Today, that same household might contain multiple smart phones, laptops, tablets and streaming video accounts. No single infrastructure element speaks to both quality of life and economic development like broadband.

Google, if you are lucky enough to have access, “Rural Broadband Issues in Georgia,” and you will see a host of problems and attempted solutions that have become one of the hottest topics of debate at the Georgia Legislature.

The Board of Commissioners has repeatedly heard concerns from citizens about access to broadband—primarily in the southern part of the county, but in the north as well.

In response to this need, we intend to explore building a middle-mile fiber-optic network and collaborating with a private internet provider in a public-private partnership to facilitate quality broadband access for all citizens. Internet service has traditionally been the domain of the “telecom” industry—national corporations reporting to shareholders with massive budgets to build out infrastructure networks. These corporations are market-driven and seek profits for their shareholders.

Broadband access is not an issue in the metro Atlanta area because there is sufficient residential and commercial density to ensure a strong return on investment. As you move further away from that sort of density, into areas like Oconee County, the return on investment declines because the corporations have to invest in much more infrastructure to reach significantly fewer customers.

While there has already been telecom investment in Oconee County, claims of adequate access fall short of reality when companies want to charge \$500 a month for substandard service—if that service is even available at all. Or you are not getting the speeds providers are charging for.

The principles of free market are strongly held in this county. The county does not wish to “compete with the private sector” in this effort; however, up to this point, there has been little to no incentive for telecoms to invest adequately in the county. While this strategy makes business sense, it does little to provide a necessary service to Oconee County.

We are excited about the middle-mile fiber ring project and believe that the right partnership and strategy will enable the entire county to enjoy quality broadband services. Currently we are in the process of finding the best partners for the county, and we hope to enter into agreements in the fall.

County Talk Columns are submitted to the Oconee Enterprise and appear in the print edition on the date listed.