

Job One: Expanding The Fiber Footprint



Mile By Mile, The Light Network Grows

Branching fiber networks along the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina are helping upend early predictions that rural America would have to wait years for Fiber-to-the-Premises to be feasible. One technological drama now unfolding centers in the thermal belts — verdant zones ideal for growing apples, grapes, and peaches. For decades, marketing the moderate climate has drawn retirees to Polk County, whose Chamber of Commerce website is an idyllic cyber location graced with restful and alluring photos. What is anything but moderate nowadays is the zeal of the area's technology champions to make their hometowns competitors in a knowledge-based economy. Spurred on by the loss of traditional manufacturing jobs in apparel and furniture, and conscious of the shortcomings of scenery and seasonal spin as a foundation for the future, they are fighting to transform the region using the essential tool of a fiber optic communications backbone. It is an initiative that has been “bootstrapping its way into existence,” says Jim Edwards, an economic development professional in the area.

“My personal passion for this is greater than anything in my career,” says technology consultant Ken Rossen, who led efforts to win the \$375,000 state grant that built the first seven miles of the network. Called PANGAEA, and headquartered in the town of Tryon, the network went live in July 2004. *Broadband Properties* leaped to recognize the pioneering accomplishment by bestowing a Cornerstone award on PANGAEA and its parent, e-Polk, Inc., at our annual Summit in September 2004. Rossen had actually been inspired by a local initiative in Hayesville, a remote mountain town to the West in Clay County. I recall that even as we handed out the award at our luncheon, more than one attendee said they thought fiber optic connections for homes and businesses in a sparsely populated mountain region was a silly waste of money. “What are they going to use all that bandwidth for up in the hills?” scoffed one communications expert at the time. Today, the network has received a total of \$885,000 in grants and is

on the verge of expanding to 42 miles.

One goal of the e-Polk leaders has been to attract data-intensive entrepreneurial businesses. Connected to the network today is a firm that invests in nanotechnology ventures called Nanotech Capital LLC, as well as the Tryon offices of RIM Direct, which oversees the manufacture of high-tech medical equipment in Asia, and AuditHead, which helps businesses lower their utility bills. Doctors are using the network's capacity to transfer medical records and for remote diagnostics, says Edwards. As the network expands, developers creating new residential communities will be using its capacity to enable Fiber-to-the-Home.

To date, e-Polk, Inc.'s biggest customer is the county school system, which has quadrupled its service at half the price. Early on, Rossen marveled at the accomplishments he saw in Clay County under the direction of the schools technology director, Andy Gibson. They included an amphitheater equipped for outdoor videoconferencing and a lagoon with an underwater webcam for science projects that students could view from home or share with sister schools. Today Polk County schools, under its technology director Dave Scherping, provides plentiful bandwidth to teachers in almost every classroom. Students videoconference with others across the state and share teachers in distant locations.

“The biggest challenge is continuing to expand the footprint of the fiber network,” says Edwards, who thanks AFL Telecommunications, who built the network, “for taking us under their wing and being very helpful.”

One tool these community leaders did not have was solid proof about the economic impact of broadband. None existed. Future proponents will have the benefit of the landmark study written up in our cover story, “Measuring Broadband's Economic Impact.” It starts on page 12. Read it now.

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