

ARRA Spurs Steady Stream of Projects

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By Scott Lewis

While most American Recovery and Reinvestment Act-funded projects are well under way or complete, the stimulus-funded broadband initiative is still in its early stages. Unlike highway agencies and the General Services Administration, which had backlogs of shovel-ready projects to choose from, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration virtually had to start from scratch, sources say.



Photo courtesy of SDN Communications
South Dakota project will connect more hospitals and schools to SDN's network.

The NTIA's Broadband Technologies Opportunity program has funded a plethora of broadband projects. The program's mission, NTIA officials say, is to provide access to broadband service to unserved and underserved regions, connect community anchor institutions (schools, libraries, medical facilities) and improve access by public safety agencies.

As NTIA's Tony Wilhelm, director of the program, explains, "After the passage of the stimulus bill in April 2009, we spent the next 18 months setting up a competitive grants program. The need we identified through the application process was very real." More than 1,500 applicants submitted grant proposals, and NTIA identified 123 winning bids in September 2010. The winners are splitting a pool of \$3.5 billion in stimulus-funded grants. Says Wilhelm, "The program requires each project to put skin in the game by raising a minimum of 20%

in matching funds." The winning groups contributed or raised \$1.4 billion in matching funds, bringing the total to \$4.9 billion.

One of the program participants, the University of Arkansas, won a \$102-million grant to extend broadband access to every county in the state. The grant will expand the ARE-ON network, an existing backbone network that currently connects 10 different state university branches to another four-year college and 22 community colleges. The grant also will expand the Arkansas Telehealth Oversight & Management network. "Rural areas of Arkansas lack access to sub-specialty consults," says Dr. Curtis Lowery, chairman of the ob-gyn department at the University of Arkansas College of Medicine and the director of the Center for Distance Health.

BHC RHODES, Overland Park, Kan., an engineering firm, is performing the design work on the Arkansas project. Bill Brungardt, BHC's executive vice president and the project manager, says, "Thirty-two million dollars of the costs are reserved for conduit and fiber construction work." The rest is going to purchase equipment (routers, switch gear, amplifiers, batteries) that will be deployed throughout the network. "There will be 18 equipment shelters—18-ft by 24-ft prefabricated concrete buildings to hold transmission gear and routers—which will be link points to the colleges and other interconnection points," he adds. The work will be split between three conduit and fiber packages and four packages covering the 18 fiber-hut sites. Construction will start in July 2011 and take about a year to complete.

The Illinois Fiber Resources Management Group, a non-profit partnership known as iFiber, received a \$68.5-million BTOP grant to deploy an 870-mile network across nine counties in northwest Illinois. iFiber will connect as many as 500 community anchor institutions and bring more affordable and accessible broadband service to as many as 280,000 households and 16,000 businesses by enabling 10 local internet service providers to use the project's open network. Engineering firm Baxter & Woodman, Crystal Lake, Ill., is conducting an environmental assessment and wetland permitting for iFiber. More than 95% of iFiber's cable will be buried, says Jim Sparber, Baxter & Woodman project manager. "Our job is to get that fiber to the curb," says Sparber. "We're interested to see what these institutions are going to do with it. That's the most exciting part—how they're going to leverage that."

"[These projects] will lead to additional jobs and construction opportunities," says Wilhelm. "These things are really catalysts." In eastern Massachusetts, the network is connected to the broader economy. "They are attracting data centers and smart-grid firms," he says.