

Local cooperative concerned with proposed fiber project

Written by Chris Lee

After learning of plans for a fiber-optic project in the Holyoke area, Phillips County Telephone Company, d/b/a PC Telcom, became a bit concerned, as they recently finished installing fiber throughout the area.

Tuesday night, June 19, PC Telcom CEO Vince Kropp attended the Holyoke City Council meeting to let council members know PC Telcom is interested in providing input into the permit process. Kropp said he realizes the city council needs a neutral permit process but still has a few remaining questions regarding EAGLE-Net—the company planning to install fiber to schools, libraries, hospitals and government entities throughout Colorado.

Kropp first sent a letter to council members at their June 5 meeting outlining his concerns after hearing EAGLE-Net had applied for a permit to install fiber in Holyoke.

“Who has given them authority to access the public right of way?” Kropp said last week.

In 2008 the federal government developed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) stimulus package to create jobs and stimulate the economy. Part of this package directed the Department of Commerce to authorize two agencies that provide policy for national telecommunications—National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) and the Rural Utilities Service (RUS).

NTIA and RUS were charged with overseeing grant dollars to further deploy broadband in unserved and underserved locations throughout the country.

EAGLE-Net (ENA) applied for a middle mile NTIA Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grant for \$100.6 million to deliver middle mile connections to unserved and underserved locations in Colorado.

Middle mile is generally referred to as the connection from the internet backbone (Denver) to a router or central office at the distant city or town (Holyoke).

ENA wrote in their grant application that they would deliver broadband to unserved areas

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through public-private partnerships and that they would collaborate with local providers when possible, according to Kropp.

According to its website, EAGLE Net started with a vision to bring high-speed internet to every public school in Colorado through public-private partnerships to build a comprehensive, statewide network.

In 2007, the Centennial Board of Cooperative Educational Services (CBOCES) developed EAGLE Net as a cost-sharing consortium for Colorado. After conducting a broadband survey of all of Colorado's K-12 school districts in 2008, CBOCES/EAGLE Net determined that market forces weren't sufficient to drive technological investment in Colorado's most remote, rural and underserved areas. It found that Colorado ranked 42nd out of all 50 states in broadband connectivity.

In response to these findings, CBOCES, as the operator of the EAGLE Net network, became an American Registry for Internet Numbering (ARIN) acknowledged Internet service provider with its own IP addressing capability.

In 2009, EAGLE Net responded to 78 school district requests for internet services and began to connect districts to the EAGLE Net network.

In coordination with the ARRA and Colorado's Recovery Act Broadband Framework, CBOCES determined that in order to expand its technology-rich broadband internet services, it would respond to the Round-1 notice of funding availability offered via the U.S. Department of Commerce BTOP, with the intent to create the EAGLE Net Alliance as an independent intergovernmental entity to deploy and operate the statewide network.

The initial Round-1 BTOP application proposed using public-private partnerships to improve Colorado's technological infrastructure. Although the Round-1 application was not funded, another application for connecting Colorado's middle mile was submitted in Round-2 and was awarded a \$100.6 million grant from BTOP in September 2010.

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EAGLE-Net is moving forward to build new infrastructure and provide broadband services to community anchor institutions throughout Colorado.

According to a map on the EAGLE-Net website, the leg of fiber into Holyoke is scheduled to be completed by August of this year with the entire statewide project slated to be finished by August of 2013. The map shows fiber running from Akron to Sterling and then east to Fleming, Haxtun and Holyoke. From Holyoke it runs north to Sedgwick County.

Kropp said he has been in contact with other telecommunications providers who are in a similar spot with EAGLE-Net planning to overbuild them. He has spoken with Eastern Slope Telephone and Blanca Telephone.

Kropp said up until recently, there has been communication between PC Telcom and EAGLE-Net. He noted they were talking about having EAGLE-Net lease PC Telcom's fiber instead of burying more fiber right next to the existing fiber leading to the school. Kropp said PC Telcom has been speaking with EAGLE-Net for a couple of years. Originally, the two were going to try to collaborate to connect BOCES with Denver.

PC Telcom installed fiber optic facilities sufficient to serve the Holyoke School District and neighboring schools, and made arrangements necessary for the network to provide distance learning to the schools of NEBOCES (Ovid, Julesburg, Holyoke, Haxtun, Fleming, Wray, Akron, Otis, Lone Star, Merino, Peetz and NEBOCES).

PC Telcom worked with NEBOCES on their initial grant application for distance learning equipment, which was successful. PC Telcom has also installed the networks necessary to serve the communities of Fleming, Haxtun, Holyoke, Julesburg, Ovid, Sedgwick and Chappell, Neb.

When EAGLE-Net was applying for their grant, PC Telcom was asked to show their support. Kropp said he was very nervous back then but knew they were very successful at getting policy makers and elected officials behind them.

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Kropp said the position PC Telcom held at the time of discussion was that they were fine with broadband going into unserved areas.

Kropp said he agrees with the concept to take broadband where it doesn't exist. "That makes sense," he added. "But a state run agency that is overbuilding existing telecommunications providers and competing with private business is simply wrong."

"If the state is allowed to compete against existing telecommunications providers then who is next? Perhaps next we will have state run power companies and state run newspapers. Where does it end? Where do democratic principles end and other forms of government begin? Does it make sense for the state or federal government to be competing with private enterprise?" These are just a few of the questions that have come up since getting wind of the proposed fiber project.

"There's obviously a lot of questions that need to be answered before they start constructing," Kropp said.

To learn more about EAGLE-Net, visit www.co-eaglenet.net .

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