

Broadband grant to fund study here

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Residents of rural parts of Arkansas County frustrated by the slow speed of dial-up Internet connections may get some relief in the not-too-distant future.

Connect Arkansas last Friday was awarded a \$149,563 grant from the Delta Regional Authority (DRA) for broadband assessment plans for Arkansas, Phillips and Desha counties.

In partnership with the DRA's Information Technology Program called "iDelta," the Connect Arkansas "e-Community" initiative will direct a community outreach effort to create local commitment and participation that will increase awareness, use and deployment of broadband resources in Arkansas and the other two counties.

Eileen Denne, executive vice president of Connect Arkansas, said that the assessment would start later this spring and would likely take about 18 months.

The first step in the process would be to conduct a survey of broadband access and community needs. Connect Arkansas would prepare a report and then hold meetings of community leaders and residents to get public input.

The next step would be to determine the amount and type of infrastructure needed to make broadband access to the rural parts of the county, Denne said.

She said the federal grant would not pay for any engineering service necessary to implement broadband access in the county.

The grant-funded assessment "is an important step that will help to bring accessible, affordable broadband internet to these Delta counties," said Senate Agriculture Committee chair Blanche Lincoln, who announced the grant last Friday in Helena. "Broadband has become an essential factor for economic development and growth. It is quickly becoming a requirement for many businesses when they are considering where to locate, and rural Arkansas will not be able to compete with other parts of the country without it."

Area leaders were pleased with the grant and the survey it will fund.

"These days, everything is going to computers and the Internet," said DeWitt Mayor Aubrey McGhee. "The more accessibility we have to broadband as rural communities can do nothing but help us. This funding will provide us with a way to connect to other parts of the country and the

world.”

Steven F. Murray, chancellor of Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas, agreed. “It is clear that broadband will be the interstate highway system of the 21st century. Senator Lincoln’s support for the work of Connect Arkansas will help to ensure that the citizens of Phillips and Arkansas counties are not bypassed.”

“As an employee of Phillips Community College and a state representative, I recognize and appreciate the expansion of broadband capacity in Arkansas, Phillips and Desha counties,” said state Rep. Tiffany Rogers. “Initiating the Connect Arkansas plan will have a positive impact on the infrastructure of these three Delta counties and ultimately economic development opportunities. Phillips Community College operates three campuses within Arkansas and Phillips counties and offers satellite classes in Desha County. This expansion will enhance our communication and technology capabilities between the campuses and provide us with advanced educational opportunities. We sincerely thank Senator Lincoln for her insight and dedication to the Delta.”