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## 3 Areas Eyed for Broadband Project

By Paul Gingras

Either Clark, Brevort, or Portage township could be selected for improved Internet service under a pilot project to provide broadband in the county. Better Web access, higher speed, and greater reliability will be the result of the Gigabit Community Project being introduced by Mackinac Economic Alliance (MEA).

The group will select one of the three townships, all of which have the population and access to cable necessary to expand Internet, but also have limited service options.

Surveys will gauge the level of demand for better Internet service as part of the selection process. Once a community is chosen, MEA will apply for grants, to be matched by the selected township. The goal is to entice an Internet service provider to tie into a fiber optic cable that already runs through the Eastern Upper Peninsula.

"Some areas have more options for Internet service than others," said MEA President Dean Reid. "These three are really challenged. Hopefully, our success in one area will be replicated in others."

Fiber optic cable provides a much larger bandwidth over which to deliver Internet signals, compared to coaxial and telephone cable. This can result in faster and more uniform speed. But tapping into the existing cable and distributing the Internet signal to businesses and households is expensive, so the MEA is seeking to provide financial incentive.

Broadband service would bring the rural communities in the Eastern

U.P. more in line with the capabilities of metropolitan areas downstate, and thus make businesses and residents more competitive.

Online educational courses and business operations are two areas that suffer when efficient Internet service is not available.

“For anyone who’s seeking additional education or certification through online courses, especially for people who work and can’t travel back and forth, it’s essential to have broadband,” said Caroline Crecelius, the assistant director at MEA.

“It also connects businesses to the larger network of businesses. Businesses with the reliable and high-speed Internet service enabled by broadband infrastructure can participate in online sales, network with other business owners, and work from their homes, effectively.”

Clark Township Supervisor Gary Reid says seasonal residents also benefit by the ability to work from their cottages and, thus, spend more time here, which also contributes more to the local economy.

High-speed Internet is attractive to people who want to move here, and would be especially important in attracting young people, Ms. Crecelius said.

Real estate agents say the availability of broadband Internet is among the first questions asked by people seeking property.

A Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Internet access map incorrectly shows some access or good access in the areas of great need, but a Connect Michigan map detailing underserved areas shows Cedarville, Brevort, and Portage townships to be the most challenged in terms of Internet access.

MEA is working with Jason Kronemeyer, director of technology for the EUP Intermediate School District, and Steve Mason, general manager for the Internet service provider, Lighthouse.net. Their collaboration enabled MEA to locate the areas that would be most attractive to Lighthouse and other providers and eligible for grants.

Proving demand for broadband in the three townships is key to the project.

“This is where we need the help of community members,” Ms. Crecelius said.

By the end of April, MEA will have a survey on its Web site for residents of Clark, Brevort, and Portage townships to fill out, and the organization is discussing other ways to get the survey to as many residents as possible, including mail and public areas, such as libraries, town halls, and special events. The survey is “the first step in correcting the FCC map,” she added. “It’s important that every resident in the community who is interested in broadband lets their voice be heard. [Doing so] lets providers know that these areas are underserved and are willing to support a broadband network.”

Internet service providers have been using inaccurate maps to decide where to invest, Ms. Crecelius said. This has prevented them from investing in resources to build a local broadband network. To secure grants to develop broadband, the surveys must be disseminated as soon as possible.

"If funds become available and your community doesn't have any record of support for a project, the project won't be considered," she explained.

Once the MEA creates a record of community support for broadband, it will research costs to build connections between the fiber cable and the community.

To get the pilot project off the ground, the MEA needs "community champions," said Dean Reid of MEA. "In Moran and Curtis, there were people in the audience who really wanted to get this moving."

Proponents note that with limited bandwidth in existing service, as demand grows, the limited data transfer is shared by more and more people, and speed slows to a crawl. This is apparent when school lets out and in the evenings, when more people are accessing the Internet.

MEA Director Anne Ottaway said this is exacerbated by the increase in use of mobile devices, which create even more demand on the limited bandwidth provided by existing cables.

Tapping into the main fiber optic line will enable service providers to offer more bandwidth.

"We thought there would be an appetite for this [project] because this is going to happen more and more," said Ms. Ottaway. "People are not going to feel that they're covered in the ways that they were even five years ago because we didn't have these devices."

She added, "I wonder what's going to happen when all the summer people get back."

MEA is hoping for strong community support for the Gigabit Community Project because, for each township, she said, "we have to get survey responses from 51% of community residents."

During a discussion of the project at Clark Township April 12, Trustee Jason Sherlund expressed concern that the survey could confuse residents accustomed to slow Internet service. A question asking whether they feel they have adequate Internet service, for example, could yield "yes" answers from people who recently moved from dialup to better methods, he said.

Amy Polk of the Les Cheneaux Islands Chamber of Commerce and Tourist Association said local businesses could be the strongest supporters for the broadband project because they recognize the need. Resorts, she said, have told her they have lost customers because broadband Internet is not available. Some Clark Township businesses complain that existing Internet service inexplicably shuts down.

In other areas, notably parts of Barbeau and properties along the Pine River, there are no Internet service providers at all.

Options including cellular based Internet hotspots and satellite dish systems are prohibitively expensive for many people, Dean Reid said.

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