

Fiber optic lines on way in South Charleston

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As national, big-name communications companies use government money to install fiber optic lines across West Virginia, the city of South Charleston is keeping its funds closer to home.

It's for the same goal — extending state-of-the-art fiber optic lines to homes.

The city is spending \$6 million on the project, a substantial savings, by buying material and purchasing labor at no cost, thanks to local internet provider SecureNet.

SecureNet chief executive officer Kevin Mullins has supervised 18 months of fiber optic line installation. Once the lines are laid and service is up and running, the city and SecureNet will split the revenue. SecureNet will provide customer service and billing.

SecureNet will charge \$40 a month for 250 megabytes per second; \$60 for 500 megabytes per second; and \$80 a month for a full gigabyte. Frontier charges \$55 a month for 500 megabytes per second and \$80 for the full gig.

“I sat down with Kevin in the beginning,” South Charleston Mayor Frank Mullens said. “I made sure he understood the customer service side. I think it's fair to say we have a reputation for our city services. I let Kevin know how important that was to us.”

A blustery fall Thursday had Mullins and a few of his men extending a connection on Hog Alley, just off Third Avenue and half a block from D Street. SecureNet maintains vaults, underground storage compartments with a lid, that contain “cans” of cables and fiber. Other similar connections are housed in boxes.

Fiber is a collection of thin glass strands that carry information much faster than traditional coaxial cable. The “cans” SecureNet is installing consist of half-inch cables containing 12 “tubes,” which are wispy-thin plastic wires. Each tube contains 12 fibers, which are about as wide as a human hair. So that's 144 fibers per cable.

Cable containing fiber — procured from the even tinier tubes — runs out of the splice vaults and eventually connects with a box on a utility pole. Workers patch the tubes and ports into the box, the different colors dictating which ports they fit into and which part of town they will serve. It's all kept track of at City Hall by a collection of servers and other gear.

Mullins said he made his living as a “networker,” dealing in computer maintenance, until he became upset with his internet service and decided he could form a company to do it better.

Kenna Homes, a well-known South Charleston landmark, turned out to be his first client. In 2015, Mullins installed fiber hookups at the massive complex, in which

residents own their own apartments. His next major interaction with Mayor Mullens and the city came during the height of COVID, when the mayor heard a public housing project had no internet and students could not complete their lessons. From there, a plan was born.

Mullins said about 80% of the city is now ready for “last mile” service or has received it already. This refers to the final physical connection into a home, normally handled by the actual internet service provider once the larger infrastructure is in place. In South Charleston, underground cans and upright boxes of fiber dot the map. Mullins said the project should be pretty much done by Christmas.

Mullins said he did not recommend that the city go the route of some other towns across the country, which charge a fee for the fiber optic hookup. A well-known pilot project in Idaho charges a homeowner \$3,000, to be paid up front or over time, but the line is a permanent part of the property.

“We quickly realized that we needed to build our own infrastructure, if we were going to do this right,” City Manager Rick Atkinson said in a news release. “We interviewed companies which build municipal fiber networks and prices came in at between \$20 [million] and \$22 million.”

The mayor said other providers may patch into the fiber, if they wish.

“We’ve talked to some other companies, and there’s been some interest in leasing fiber from us,” Mullens said. “We’re not knocking anyone out. We think competition is vital in keeping prices down.”

Frontier, meanwhile, and Windstream have collectively gained more than \$210 million worth of broadband grants across nine states, thus far in 2022, according to the internet site Fierce Telecom.

A Frontier official said its wins span seven states, including \$1.7 million in West Virginia to reach just under 3,000 locations.

Optimum, formerly Suddenlink, received \$6 million from a West Virginia program to build out its fiber network to more than 9,000 homes and businesses in Kanawha, Jackson and Lincoln counties.

“All told, since it began pursuing grants in mid-2021 after emerging from bankruptcy in April,” Fierce Telecom site reported, “Frontier has received more than \$70 million in state funding [from all states], with more than \$22.4 million of that coming in 2022 alone.”

Scott Peyton, of SecureNet, said he is happy to be doing his part in South Charleston.

“I love it,” he said. “I love the guys I work with and the people of South Charleston. They’re excited to get our service.”