Category: Service Sharing

When the Upper Iowa River flooded Decorah’s emergency operations center in 2008, the community began focusing on how to enable redundant operations and communications for the area. The city of Decorah, Winneshiek County and Decorah Community Schools saw community-wide benefit to expanding the school district’s project to connect its buildings. The idea: an 11-mile fiber optic loop throughout the community to enable better disaster recovery and bring broadband Internet access to the community.

Retired City Manager Jerry Freund was involved in the early project discussions. “We got together, the city, the county and the school district, initially. Those talks led to an invitation to Luther College, as well as the Winneshiek Medical Center,” Freund said. Eventually the Upper Explorerland Regional Planning Commission became involved in the project as well.

“Initially, the school district funded our own portion of this because we had to do ours regardless of what anybody else did. We had an urgent need to connect our buildings for data sharing, for resources, for testing purposes,” Kurt DeVore, Director of Information Technology for the Decorah Community Schools, said.

MetroNet, a 28E entity, was formed in 2010 to help make this public-private service sharing project a reality, with the city serving as fiscal agent for the crucial Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grant from the National Telecommunications & Information Administration.

“The BTOP grant was the grant that really provided the basic support for the installation of the fiber,” current Decorah City Manager Chad Bird said. “Each organization put in $75,000 over three years which provided the 30 percent match and then some additional funding beyond construction because we knew there would be equipment costs and other build-out type things that weren’t covered by the grant that we would have to cover.” Ultimately the project totaled $890,000.

In September 2013, installation of a loop of 144 strands of fiber optic cable – double the standard 72 strands used in most fiber optic installs—completed. The loop, with portions strung overhead and some installed underground to “spread the risk”, connects most of the facilities of the six anchor organizations. By installing the fiber in a loop, the entire network is more likely to perform even if a portion of the loop fails. The impact was felt almost the instant the fiber was lit, in both Internet access savings and speed.

“We saw our speeds increase more than 100 fold to over 300MB or more,” Bird said. “That’s pretty amazing when you actually see it happen and your productivity can increase because of that.”

The anchor organizations are also seeing savings in other areas due to the connectivity the fiber optic loop provides. Server consolidation and virtualization projects have enabled the county IT infrastructure to go from 18 servers to two. An aggregated Voice Over IP phone project is under development as well. The group is also looking at ways to expand the network for economic development for the community.

“I think we have something that’s going to be safe, reliable, predictable and expandable,” Winneshiek County Supervisor Dean Thompson said. “I don’t know what more you can say about a project that shows its early and future success.”