

Partnership addresses network resilience in McKinley

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GALLUP — The Office of Broadband Access and Expansion (OBAE) announced on March 3 that they would be part of a critical solution to Gallup and McKinley County's recurring broadband outages – the long-awaited establishment of a redundancy line to serve as the community's broadband connection in the event of a disconnect.

This week OBAE and Sacred Wind Communications/Ethos Broadband shared more information about the partnership and the roles each partner will play. OBAE's announcement cited that they would be working with Sacred Wind Communications/Ethos Broadband and CenturyLink/Lumen Technologies. Lumen Global Issues Director Mark Molzen was contacted for comment on the initiative and no reply was provided.

Response to outages

The internet outage in August served as the kickoff for the partnership between McKinley County, the City of Gallup, Sacred Wind, Lumen and other stakeholders. The outage was number 11 over the course of 10 years.

Several meetings since then have had the goal of addressing the broadband outages. At meetings in August and September stakeholders came to the same solution, for CenturyLink to establish a redundancy line to avoid any more broadband outages. Lumen was especially encouraged to explore potential interconnections between existing infrastructure and purchase redundancy access with Sacred Wind.

At the second meeting in September, Sacred Wind Communications/Ethos Broadband General Manager Nectarios "Neo" Nicolaou said that, despite being encouraged to do so by local government officials, Lumen did not have much engagement with Sacred Wind to work on the issue.

OBAE comments

OBAE Acting Director Drew Lovelace was interviewed by the Independent via phone on Tuesday. He explained the path to the partnership and the roles each entity will play. First he explained that the OBAE operates as a grant-making agency which lacks authority to address the outages directly. In their announcement they cited that OBAE will be supplying \$500,000 worth of equipment to construct a redundancy line, with Sacred Wind performing the construction. OBAE is utilizing the Statewide Education Network (SEN) to support the construction. The line is estimated to be completed in the next six months.

Lovelace was asked what CenturyLink's role in the solution is as it was not clearly outlined in the announcement. "Lumen has the existing transport line that goes between Gallup and Albuquerque," Lovelace replied, "and those are our critical lines. It's kind of the long-standing old phone/internet backhaul system from

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the last 35-40 years and so they are providing their asset that is already in the ground.”

Sacred Wind comments

In a phone interview Friday, Sacred Wind/Ethos Broadband Senior Account Executive Phyllis Vigil Herrera explained that CenturyLink and Sacred Wind had negotiated a multi-year lease agreement for CenturyLink to subscribe to their network during a broadband outage. The agreement offers renewal service terms.

Vigil-Herrera explained that the agreement was made in the interest of helping to provide the area with a critical service. In an email she confirmed that Sacred Wind will serve as the primary underlying provider of the redundant high-speed fiber optic network for 100 gig optical wave services (OWS) to be leased to CenturyLink/Lumen as part of the agreement. When asked about the timeline Vigil-Herrera said that Sacred Wind is prepared to hand off and begin steps towards test and acceptance with CenturyLink/Lumen on the first of three 100 gig OWS and she reported that CenturyLink said they will be ready for those steps on Monday. She noted that additional equipment needed for the next

order is backlogged and delayed with shipping embargoes.

‘A quick solution’

Lovelace explained that in exchange for OBAE’s funding and equipment, Sacred Wind is providing access to communities where OBAE wants to use the SEN, providing fiber lines from Sacred Wind. He cited that Sacred Wind was already building the line and is about six months away from completion. The OBAE office will fund the contract and place an order for equipment to make the interconnection between CenturyLink and Sacred Wind. “The project will still take a little bit of time but it’s just around the corner, which is nice.” Lovelace said. “Many broadband projects that are started from scratch can take four or five years and so having this project already in progress from Sacred Wind/Ethos really makes it a quick solution.”

Vigil-Herrera explained that Sacred Wind’s spent years investing in its own high-speed and robust fiber optic infrastructure along the Albuquerque to Gallup I-40 corridor and throughout their coverage area. The company plans to continue to build in the northwest corner of the state.

Accessible and reliable

On Sacred Winds’ plan for the line to remain accessible and reliable overtime, Vigil-Herrera said, “ETHOS Sacred Wind Communications is fully committed to excellent customer service, meeting our contract service objectives and obligations with a keen focus on our end-user customers, and our provider partner’s demands. Our Network Operations is constantly working on routine maintenance routines and improvements working to grow and expand the network where necessary.

“We’re honored and grateful to be your service provider and take your service needs and issues very seriously and are here to support our network infrastructure and customer demands for service for the duration.”

Lovelace commended OBAE Project Managers Alex Trujillo, Eric Moores, and Bureau Chief Richard Govea as the creative problem solvers behind the project.

Lovelace said the first option OBAE explored was trying to connect CenturyLink and Sacred Wind, but that the option turned out not to be sufficient and so the office looked for solutions internally. “This is where we looked at it like, ‘What is it that we can bring to the table and what do we need?’” Lovelace cited. He later approved the solution that the team came up with.

Funding for the OBAE comes from sources such as the federally funded CARES Act and the SEN is funded

through the New Mexico Public Schools Facility Authority.

High-speed internet access for all

As for continued maintenance and operational support of the line once it is in place, that falls on Sacred Wind for the next five years, Lovelace confirmed. To ensure sustainability, the OBAE is preparing for future upgrades. “We’re hoping that the economics are there with an existing relationship and hopefully there’s more customers for those providers that then make it a non-issue, they’ll be able to maintain it on their own,” Lovelace said.

High-speed internet access for all remains a primary focus for OBAE in their ongoing broadband expansion efforts. Lovelace explained that their aim is to ensure that students and residents in rural areas can access reliable internet, not just during school hours, but at home as well. The OBAE is also exploring cost-effective solutions like licensed fixed wireless technologies and satellite internet to provide coverage in hard-to-reach areas.

As the legislative session draws to a close, the OBAE is advocating for the passage of Senate Bill 401, which would provide the OBAE with the authority to continue managing the education network and ensure that they continue to manage the long-term sustainability of broadband infrastructure in rural communities.