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Stimulus funds help expand, improve local broadband access

BY ATHENA PONUSHIS
aponushis@floridaweekly.com



"I cannot imagine life without ..." a survey by the Pew Research Center asked 14- to 29-year-olds. Almost all the respondents, 97 percent, said "my mobile phone," while 43 percent said "my current partner."

It's this overwhelming and growing reliance on technology that has led to the creation of the Local Broadband Advisory

Committee, a state-financed group that is working with similar boards in Tampa and Orlando to ensure that high speed Internet access is as common as running water and paved roads.

The Florida Broadband initiative was awarded an \$8.8 million grant by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, part of the federal Department of Commerce. "It's stimulus money," said Bill Price, the manager of the program for the state of Florida.

The funding was divided among five projects, with \$990,000 going to regional broadband planning — where our Local Broadband Advisory Committee comes in.

"We all use technology," explains Jennifer Pellechio, project manager for the state's broadband planning project. "Everybody has a cellphone, a smartphone, medical records have transferred over, even public safety has transferred over. People don't go into work and not use a computer."

Almost six months in, the Local Broadband Advisory Committee has held its kickoff meeting and stayed busy gathering material (especially data on the demand side), drafting maps, formulating a social media presence and developing the broadband plan.

"The real objective at the end of the day, is to identify the resources and assets our communities have, and identify the opportunities we have to participate in the digital economy," says Mr. Price.

"And when I say digital economy," he clarifies, "I don't mean fiber lines in the trenches. It's the whole ecosystem."

He delineates the Florida Broadband Planning Project as a two-year project, the second year set for implementation in two pilot areas — one in Charlotte, Lee and Collier counties, the other in Polk County.

The story of implementing this broadband plan, takes Ms. Pellechio a moment or two to piece together. She uses words like "educate" and "build relationships" between different sectors, "what we call anchor institutions," meaning schools, libraries, government agencies. She says these "anchors" have the same desire, "speed of technology." And this does not just magically appear.

"People just assume, like roads, that the government will build more," she says. "But you have to plan for roads. And you have to plan for technology. And technology keeps evolving."

The next Local Broadband Advisory Committee meeting has been set for 9 a.m. Friday, March 9 at the Florida Gulf Coast University Lutgert College of Business. The meeting is open to the public. Mr. Price encourages people to attend, saying, "It's important for people to have a clear understanding of what this all means, why it's a good thing and how to participate." For more information, visit www.swfregionalvision.com.

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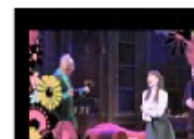
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