

Groups unite to fix digital divide in NE W-S

BY TEVIN STINSON
THE CHRONICLE

Various local organizations have partnered with AT&T to launch an initiative called NETT (Neighborhood Empowerment Through Technology) that will widen the access to technology, and enhance the digital literacy skills of residents in the northeast portion of the city.

During a ceremony held at Carl Russell Sr. Recreation Center on Tuesday, July 28, Mayor Pro Tempore Vivian Burke read a proclamation officially launching the initiative. After reading the declaration signed by Mayor Allen Joines, who was unable to attend the ceremony, Burke said she was overjoyed with the partnership that will bring low-

cost home Internet to residents in need.



Burke

"I am glad that we have organizations that are willing to come together, and get out in our neighborhoods to make sure we are all on the same page," continued Burke. "Access to the Internet and basic computer skills are required in today's society."

"I speak for the mayor and the other elected officials when I say we are thankful for the organizations we have in this city. These various organizations help us have the wonderful city we have here today."

Organizations partnering with the city on NETT include the Winston-Salem Urban League, Winston-Salem State University (WSSU), Forsyth Technical Community College (FTCC), Forsyth County Public Library, WinstonNet and the United Way of Forsyth County.

"There are a lot of organizations that came together to make this possible, but our goal is to speak as one voice," said Urban League CEO James Perry.

"It's going to take one voice in order to make sure the NETT project is extremely effective and serves this community well," he said. "This is a wonderful great initiative. We want to bridge the digital divide in this community."

Perry, who was the

driving force behind the



Perry

partnership, said he was excited to see the initiative finally come to life. He also mentioned the importance of the United Way, which will provide the funding for the program. NETT is also included in the United Way's Place Matters initiative.

Under the NETT program, AT&T will provide its Access Program to qualifying neighborhoods in northeast Winston-Salem. According to AT&T regional director of external affairs, Kathleen Evans, the program will offer broadband Internet service for as low

as \$5 a month for 3 mbps (mega bites per second).

Evans noted that the program also includes a free Wi-Fi modem, and activation and installation fees will be waived as well. She mentioned to qualify, at least one member of the household must be enrolled in SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).

"We believe we will be a great asset to the NETT Program," she said. "AT&T truly appreciates local officials and local leaders who implement ordinances that support efforts, to provide services to those in need."

"AT&T is proud to support NETT," Evans said.

While improving accessibility to the Internet, the initiative will also aim to educate the community.

Forsyth Technical Community College along with WinstonNet will offer participants free computer training courses. The first 100 people to finish the course will receive a refurbished laptop for only \$25. In addition, the Forsyth County Public Library will also provide free computer courses and other training programs.

Winston-Salem State University and the Winston-Salem Urban League will be responsible for tracking the progress of the program.

For more information on NETT or to enroll in the program visit www.projectnett.com.

County to consider lowering Caterpillar incentive requirement

BY TODD LUCK
THE CHRONICLE

Along with a public hearing on county bonds on Aug. 8, county commissioners will consider other items, such as a reduction in the amount of employees Caterpillar needs to receive county incentives.

Among the many items on the commissioners full agenda on Aug. 8 are public hearings on two items involving incentives for businesses. One is \$118,000 to entice furniture maker Beaufurn to relocate to Forsyth County. The other is a change to a 2011 agreement with Caterpillar for \$10.1 million in incentives that lowers the jobs requirement.

The Caterpillar facility off Union Cross Road makes rear axles for mining trucks. A global downturn in mining has caused the company to reduce its workforce globally. Locally, Caterpillar has experienced a reduction from 341 employees last year to 289 in January.

"The current workforce totals at the Winston-Salem facility reflect alignment with global demand in the mining indus-

try," said Caterpillar Corporate Media Manager Rachel Potts in an email statement.

The company told the county it is unsure if it'll get below 196 jobs it needs to have in order to not pay the incentives back, but still wants to lower that requirement to 50 jobs.

Caterpillar is also asking to add Alabama-based Progress Rail, a Caterpillar subsidiary that supplies railroad and transit system parts and services, to the deal to bolster the amount of jobs. Caterpillar is also asking to extend the deal from 10 years to 15, meaning the company will be eligible to receive benefits longer but the maximum amount it may receive wouldn't go up.

County Commissioner Walter Marshall said he supports Caterpillar's request.

"This is the best option to save jobs," he said.

Marshall said that there are clawback provisions that force the company to completely pay the county back if it can't meet the jobs requirement, like what happened when Dell closed down its plant, but that

he had much rather see Caterpillar remain a local employer. He said he was confident the company would rebound and be able to expand its workforce again.

County Commissioner Chair Dave Plyler also said he had confidence in Caterpillar, a global company with sales and revenues of \$47 billion in 2015.

"From my perspective, I don't want to see Caterpillar leave our county because what goes down does go up sooner or later, and Caterpillar isn't the type of company that promises one thing and does another," said Plyler.

The county is only part of the incentive deal with Caterpillar, which also includes The Millennium Fund, Forsyth County Development Corporation and the City of Winston-Salem, which gave the company \$13.35 million in incentives. It will need to appeal to each of them to amend the deal.

The incentive deal the county is considering for Beaufurn, a global furniture maker located in Advance, is \$118,000 over a five-year period. In exchange, the company would invest \$6.8 million over a one-year period in the county, create 15 new full-time or full-time equivalent jobs

and retain its current 33 positions. Beaufurn makes professional grade furnishings for commercial businesses and is looking to relocate to a larger space. The company is currently considering Forsyth, Davie and other counties for its new location.

Marshall said that he is for offering incentives to Beaufurn. He said incentives are vital for the county to compete with other municipalities to attract businesses that create good jobs. Plyler said the deal would be a "win-win situation" with a nationally known company.

Even with its packed agenda, the biggest items at the August 8 meeting will be the county commissioners' votes on whether to place three bonds on the November ballot. The public will get to comment before the vote. The bonds items are a \$350 million Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools bond, a \$65 million Forsyth Technical Community College bond and a \$15 million Recreation and Parks bond.



Plyler



Marshall

More

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