

Learning Network Will Link Brunswick To 'Information Highway'

BY SUSAN USHER

Coming soon to Brunswick County: the highway to the future.

During 1994 two local campuses will be linked by fiber optic network to educational facilities in Pender and New Hanover counties, and to resources across North Carolina.

A \$484,452 grant from the federal Rural Electrification Administration announced last week will help cover the cost of adding West Brunswick High School in Shallotte and the main campus of Brunswick Community College at Supply to the Cape Fear Educational Partnership Network based at UNCW.

Also to be added are Southeastern Community College in Whiteville, Cape Fear Community College's Pender County campus, and Topsail and Pender high schools.

"The whole nation will be watching this expansion closely," said Scott Carpenter of the UNCW Division of Public Service. "The national information highway is happening here, now. This thing is really going to be great for New Hanover, Brunswick and Pender counties. The main thing is to get it out there where users can take advantage of it."

The project will double the size of the network. Its existing members are UNC Wilmington, Cape Fear Community College, New Hanover and Hoggard high schools and New Hanover Regional Medical Center. UNCW, in turn, is linked to the Microelectronic Center of North Carolina at Research Triangle Park, which houses a CRAY supercomputer.

The electronic information network connects new technologies such as fiber optic cables and digitalized switches with products such as telephones, computers and televisions. Then, through a single line running to a site, services such as video conferencing, shared classrooms and long-distance library/database research are available.

One goal of the network is to shrink the differences in opportunity for rural versus urban residents of the state.

Presently the New Hanover County high schools already use the network to teach Japanese and oceanography. A distance-learning classroom is equipped with video cameras, televisions and microphones to allow two-way interaction. Participants at any site can ask questions of anyone they see on the TV monitors.

Possible expanded uses of the network include additional courses shared among high schools and community college courses for high school students involved in Tech Prep. Carpenter said some of the biggest changes will be evident with the community colleges.

Fiber Optics Cabling To Schools Fits Into Overall ATMC Upgrade

Installing cabling required for local sites to join the Cape Fear Learning Partnership Network is just part of a much larger fiber optics upgrade Atlantic Telephone Membership Corp. began in 1989.

Engineering supervisor Delane Stanley said that by the time the current project is completed, ATMC will have doubled its fiber optic cable in the ground to 150 miles. The cable supports both the cooperative's telephone and cable television (CATV) services.

"You can't beat fiber optics for purity and clarity of transmission, but it's not cheap," he said.

A fiber optic "ring" is being created that will protect systems, especially ATMC's toll-line trunk, if a cable is cut. For example, if a cable is cut between Shallotte and Supply, the fiber ring will automatically switch telephone traffic along another route, with no loss of service.

During the four-lane improvement of U.S. 17 long-distance telephone service has been interrupted several times because there was no protection in the event of cuts.

All switching facilities across the service district are being upgraded to fiber optics. As cable is laid crews are

"Southeastern, Brunswick and Cape Fear will be able to exchange and share programs. The state is working out the logistics such as pay and course credits."

Brunswick Community College committed six to eight months ago to distance learning. President Michael Reaves said the first classroom will be housed in the ALS building, and the new Allied Health Building will be wired for fiber optics during its construction.

Eventually BCC's Leland Industrial Center and Southport campuses will be added to the network, along with North Brunswick and South Brunswick high schools.

"I'm just glad Brunswick County is close now to being on the cutting edge of technology," said Reaves. "It's a tremendous commitment. We're stepping up our efforts. We want to be on line no later than fall (1994)."

West Brunswick High Principal Ed Lemon shares Reaves' excitement about the network's potential.

"I think anything's possible," said Ed Lemon, principal of West Brunswick High School. "We're excited

adding the fibers needed for the "information highway" at all potential connection sites identified to date.

There will still be some gaps to be filled once this project is complete, including running fiber optics from Bolivia to Boiling Spring Lakes.

ATMC is also replacing its five microwave sites with 12 fiber nodes.

"That will allow us to serve areas (with cable TV) that we can't serve now without building more microwave sites," Stanley said. "And that would be foolish with changing technology."

A joint project with Southern Bell will provide ATMC a second connecting point with Southern Bell's fiber optic system. The current connecting point is near Bishop, at the intersection of U.S. 17 and N.C. 87 north. The new link would be at Bolton.

Southern Bell plans to build a fiber optic ring to protect CP&L's Brunswick Nuclear Plant and surrounding customers from telephone service interruption. ATMC and Southern Bell will cooperate in extending fiber optic cable up N.C. 211 from Supply to Bolton.

"This is going to be a huge advantage for Atlantic Telephone," said Stanley.

about that kind of thing. It's just wide open."

Long-distance learning and telecommunications skills are among the school's computer education goals for all students, he said, which prompted interest in the network from the beginning. The school's technology committee is charged with planning how the school will put its network access to best use.

The matching money for hook-up is included in this year's schools technology budget. Lemon said the main drawback at West is a facility, since the school is already so short on space five teachers are housed in mobile classrooms. A planned addition won't be ready until spring 1994 at the earliest.

"But we'll live with it to get the fiber optics," he said. "Our community is fortunate to get to participate in this."

The network link will not only benefit West Brunswick students and faculty, but the entire county school system through areas such as staff development and training.

"Anywhere you have a campus you need to have

this," said Delane Stanley, engineering supervisor for Atlantic Telephone Membership Corp., which is laying the fiber optic cable for the local sites. "You think about teachers going away for recertification. They'll be able to do that right here."

Of the 28 grants totaling \$5 million awarded by REA nationwide, the area network is receiving one-tenth of the money granted. It will be matched by \$121,114 from the new sites schools joining the network.

The Cape Fear network is a test project for the state's North Carolina Information Highway, a statewide telecommunications network that will be on the cutting edge of rapid transmission technology when completed next June. It is the first statewide broadband networking effort in the United States.

BellSouth, GTE Telephone Operations and Carolina Telephone will build, maintain and own the physical highway, with the state as a guaranteed customer. The highway will be phased in under Jane Patterson, senior policy adviser to the governor, and the Information Resource Management Commission headed by Secretary of State Rufus Edmisten.

With a pledge to give top priority to rural areas, the state has budgeted about \$4.4 million to help bring the first 104 sites onto its highway, paying their long-distance telephone charges for the first 18 months.

Schools and medical facilities will be among those first sites connected to the highway. Future phases will take in other state agencies and their local offices—such as law enforcement, the courts, health and social services at the Brunswick County Government Center and the N.C. Department of Transportation, private sector clients and eventually, even homes.

While the state "information highway" is being completed, the Cape Fear Learning Partnership Network, ATMC and Southern Bell will be busy preparing to make the connections.

Specific site plans must be developed for each network affiliate. Distance learning classrooms must have controlled environments, be physically secure, be wired for the cable and be properly equipped for communication with other sites.

Gov. Jim Hunt and other state leaders expect North Carolina's "information highway" to improve education and health care opportunities for rural residents and to provide a competitive edge in economic development and commerce.

UNCW Chancellor James R. Leutze envisions a similar boost for Southeastern North Carolina.

"That's why we thought it important for this region to be on (the highway) first," said Carpenter.



STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

Still Shopping

Vendors were packing their wares Oct. 30 at the N.C. Festival By The Sea at Holden Beach as friends Dee Goforth of Spartanburg, S.C., and Sandy Dillard of High Point, spirits undampened, finished shopping interrupted by a storm the day before. A first-time visitor, Goforth said she'll be back.

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