

Walden visits with digital network leaders

Local outage coincides with visit

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

A CenturyLink internet outage that impacted much of Grant County for at least 12 hours coincided with Rep. Greg Walden's meeting with Grant County Digital Network Coalition board at the John Day Fire Hall on Oct. 31.

Walden was there to discuss his efforts as chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce to bridge the digital divide between rural and urban areas. The coalition hopes to leverage a state appropriation and a federal grant to expand broadband service in Grant County.

Digital divide

Just 55 percent of rural residents in the United States have access to internet speeds that qualify as broadband, compared to 94 percent of urban residents, according to Brian Whitacre, an economist at Oklahoma State University.

Improving internet access for rural communities "is not simply an amenity — it has become essential," Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue noted in a January report by the Interagency Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity, which he heads.

Rural America encompasses 72 percent of U.S. land and 46 million people, with abundant natural resources, scenic landscapes and cultural amenities that attract new residents. But low population density and geographical challenges pose hurdles for the development of broadband networks needed to enable innovative technologies such as precision agriculture, teleworking, digital learning and telemedicine, the report said.

Planners point to histori-



Rep. Greg Walden, left, meets with Grant County Education Service District Superintendent Robert Waltenburg, center, and John Day Mayor Ron Lundbom to discuss broadband issues in the John Day Fire Hall Oct. 31.

cal programs that modernized rural economies as models for improving internet access — rural electrification, rural telephone service and the interstate highway system.

Perdue's task force identified five objectives and recommendations — executive leadership in Washington, a detailed infrastructure assessment, a reduction in bureaucratic regulatory barriers, an assessment of current grant and subsidy programs and encouraging private capital investment.

Government action

The Rural Prosperity report made an impact on Congress, Walden told the coalition board — Congress provided \$600 million in additional funding to help small rural communities improve internet access. That's on top of the Federal Communications Commission's Connect America Fund Phase II auction, which allocated \$1.4 billion to support broadband expansion in underserved communities in 45 states

over the next decade.

Walden's committee oversees the FCC, and he invited FCC Chairman Ajit Pai to visit Eastern Oregon in June to discuss efforts to improve connectivity in rural communities.

John Day City Manager Nick Green met with Pai and told him that John Day had received a \$1.8 million appropriation from the legislature to expand broadband in Grant County and had applied for a \$2.9 million federal Community Connect grant to implement the program.

The goal of the first phase is to run a fiber cable backbone from John Day to Seneca, with laterals to homes and businesses along Highway 395 and fiber-to-home connections in Seneca. Construction plans have been developed, and all that is needed is funding, Green told Walden.

The review process for the Community Connect grant was nearly complete, Chad Parker, an assistant administrator for Telecommunication Programs at USDA Rural Development, replied over

speakerphone.

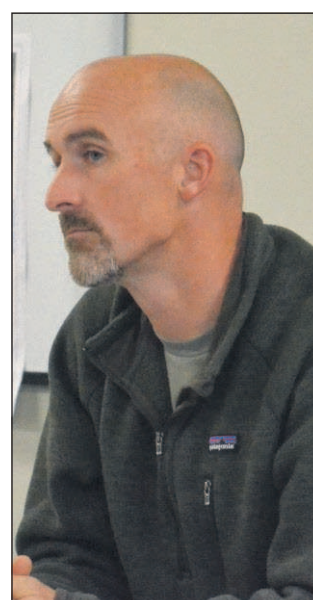
Less than 20 of the 124 grant applicants will be offered funding, Parker said. Notices of awards should be released in November or December, he said.

Comparing the competitiveness of the grant to the "Hunger Games," Green explained that the coalition spent \$93,000 developing its application. Completing such a complex application without the state appropriation would have been impossible, he said.

Due diligence

While the benefits of the engineering and planning will extend beyond the due diligence needed for the Community Connect application, not winning the grant "would suck," Green said.

Grant County belongs to a subset of rural communities called frontier, Green told Walden and Parker. The low population density and sprawling federal lands make it impossible to recover construction costs from customers. Internet providers can't bill cattle, he said. Frontier



Seneca Public Works Director Josh Walker listens to a discussion about broadband issues in the John Day Fire Hall Oct. 31.

ing bullets" and asked their team in Portland to send the application.

Local outages

The CenturyLink outage seemed to drive home the need for improved internet service in Grant County. Coalition board member Denise Porter said 28 homes in the small town of Long Creek lost service, while outages were reported across John Day.

But the situation was worse in Seneca, where service problems had continued over the past six weeks, coalition board member Josh Walker said. While service continued at his home, other residents reported throttled-down internet speeds or no service at all. The Seneca city manager conducted much of the city's online business at her home in Canyon City, he said.

Walker said he receives calls frequently from Seneca residents about the poor internet service and heard different stories from CenturyLink officials. According to Walker, a CenturyLink technician at one point said the problem had been identified, but the company wouldn't send the needed replacement part and it had to be ordered on eBay.

Green characterized the situation as a rolling brown-out and called the unwillingness of CenturyLink to invest in the local infrastructure "baffling."

"Why aren't they increasing capacity?" Walden asked.

People should be talking about improving the local economy, not this sort of thing, Green said, comparing the coalition's relationship with CenturyLink to "David and Goliath."

Walden's chief of staff, Lorissa Bounds, who was present at the local meeting, immediately began contacting people about the problem. As the meeting wound down, she told the Eagle she was speaking to CenturyLink's top lobbyist in Washington, D.C.

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