

# County looks to improve broadband in Jewell

By **ERICK BENDEL**  
The Astorian

Clatsop County may partner with Jewell School District to bring broadband to a rural region of the county where internet service is slow, spotty and often nonexistent.

At a county Board of Commissioners work session earlier this month, Steve Phillips, the Jewell superintendent, proposed hiring the firm Oregon Coast Wireless, which recently upgraded internet service in Tillamook County.

Before Phillips took a lead role in addressing the inferior internet in Jewell and Elsie, the county had worked with a consultant on the issue and stakeholders had weighed in.

Tillamook and Clatsop counties both have sparsely populated areas with weak internet service, Phillips noted, and he argued that what worked in Tillamook

could work in Clatsop.

Jewell's main internet provider is CenturyLink, which won't accept new customers in the area, Phillips said. "Frankly, the service they do provide is hit-and-miss because they're so maxed out," he said.

Less than 40% of people in that part of the county enjoy reliable internet, according to a 2020 survey of Jewell School District families. "It's tough out here," Phillips said.

He estimates that, if the community follows Tillamook's model, the cost of internet per home will fall in the \$65-a-month range. Residents in Jewell and Elsie typically pay between \$80 and \$120 a month, he said.

During coronavirus shutdowns, the school district has relied on "old-school packets," not the internet, for distance learning, he said. "And that's tough for our kids, it's tough for our teachers, to know that they're kind of missing out on a better way," Phillips said.

Under the proposed three-phase plan, a new dedicated fiber-optic cable would connect to Jewell School, which would receive one-gigabit internet. Towers would serve areas north and south.

The first phase would involve a \$500,000 contribution from the county and \$250,000 from Jewell School District.

Phase two would reach northeast into the Fishhawk Lake community. "To be honest, we don't have a ton of students there," Phillips said, "but it's a big community, and they need internet, as well."

The third phase would push south to U.S. Highway 26 and west toward Camp 18 Restaurant, he said.

The high-end total estimate for all three phases is \$1.8 million, Phillips said.

County Manager Don Bohn said the public contribution would offset the infrastructure costs that would normally be amortized as part of the rate structure. Such costs are a reason rural areas often don't enjoy internet

access, he noted. Subsidies help make these projects pencil out for developers.

Phillips advised that the county should see how the first phase goes, and make sure Oregon Coast Wireless can replicate what it did in Tillamook, before signing off on phases two and three.

The project would cover the majority of Jewell and Elsie families, but not all of them — an economy-of-scale problem, Phillips said.

Bohn said the county will also use the towers — which the school district will own, with the rest of the broadband infrastructure — for public purposes, such as beefing up communications systems for emergency responders. The area has 911 dead spots, he said.

"This may not be the 20-year solution, but what we were looking for is: What is the here-and-now solution?" Bohn said, adding that, hopefully, the project will bring at least 10 years of suitable internet.



The county hopes to improve internet access in Jewell.

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