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'Connect Ohio' program seeks to found partnerships, increase broadband accessibility

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Governor Ted Strickland's office launched his \$6.8 million Connect Ohio Initiative this week. The program is intended to create public-private partnerships to extend access to high-speed Internet to more Ohioans.

"The goal of Connect Ohio is to create customized support for local communities to meet their individual technological needs while helping expand broadband service to all residents," Strickland said.

Chillicothe-based broadband provider Horizon is hoping to play an important role as a partner in the project and it will help spur local economies.

"Broadband isn't available statewide, like a lot of people think it is," said Randy Davies, a spokesperson for Horizon. "We think this project is really going to drive economic development in the future where it hasn't in the past."

Although it's unclear exactly how the Connect Ohio initiative will pair up with Horizon, Davies said the company has already been in talks about the governor's initiatives and has embarked on a mission to deliver broadband services through their involvement with the Ohio Telecom Association. The Association is currently conducting an initiative to see where broadband areas are in Ohio.

"As members of OTA, we're helping to fund our small part of the initiative," Davies said. "Some areas are better than others, and Ross County is better than some other areas of the state and some metropolitan areas."

Companies who are a part of OTA are encouraged to work towards expanding broadband access, said OTA President Charles Moses. Moses also hoped the new program would improve local plans for broadband connectivity.

"We believe Connect Ohio will identify gaps in broadband access and create specific local plans to address the needs of individual communities."

Horizon recently received a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to help Darbyville, (a community located about 9 miles West of South Bloomfield in Pickaway County,) receive broadband.

"We're building a fiber optic network to Darbyville, and the grant also included a community center with computers," Davies said.

Future projects to expand broadband through the governor's program could include grants but Davies said Horizon is prepared to expand high-speed Internet services through partnerships with other private companies.

"If we can move to a community and have a large tenant who can help fund the transport of your services to that area, then we can provide it to smaller businesses and homes once we're there," Davies said. "So right now we're looking at anchor tenants to get us into these smaller communities."

Strickland's Connect Ohio program will be run as a non-profit with headquarters in Columbus as a subsidiary of Connected Nation. The project will be hiring staff members and regional program managers and receive oversight from the Ohio Office of Information Technology and the Ohio Broadband Council.
