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Rural Arizona schools, libraries to see new broadband internet access

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Hundreds of rural K-12 school districts, charter schools and libraries across Arizona could receive new or expanded internet access thanks to a new initiative and federal funding.

The Arizona Corporation Commission unanimously approved changes March 14 to the Arizona Universal Service Fund rules to provide money for this program to connect Arizona's rural schools to the internet.

"I am so pleased with the broad support for this program," said Commissioner Andy Tobin. "I want to encourage those involved to take this initiative into special consideration in order to supplement the governor's proposal so that all Arizona schools and libraries will have access to broadband internet."

The ACC vote paves the way for a partnership between the Corporation Commission, the Governor's Office, the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the non-profit EducationSuperHighway.

The group will draw down \$100 million in federal e-rate funds to pay for infrastructure that will provide broadband to rural schools and libraries.

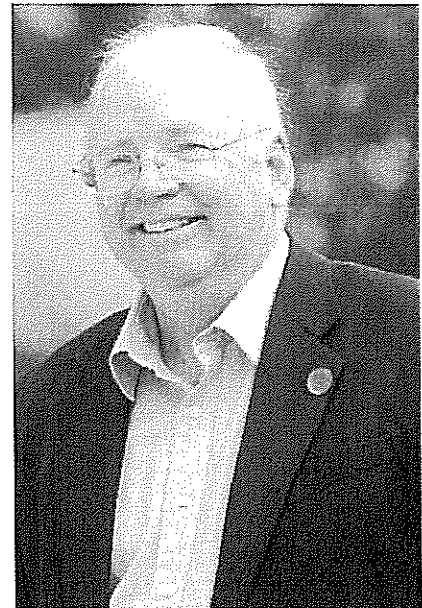
The Arizona Universal Service Fund will provide \$8 million in state match funding. An additional \$5 million is needed, and that amount is included in the governor's budget proposal.

The Arizona fund money will be collected through a 15-cent monthly telephone service charge for one year.

Telecommunications companies, such as Cox Communications, will have to apply to install the broadband through request for proposals throughout the state.

Cox was actively involved with Tobin and the e-rate broadband special construction project matching fund program, said a Cox spokeswoman.

"Cox has long supported efforts to ensure students' access to the Internet, including programs such as Connect to Compete and Cox Technology Centers established within community non-profit organizations," said Susan Anable, Cox's southwest vice president of public affairs. "We support this temporary repurpose of



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Andy Tobin

the Arizona Universal Service Fund and look forward to this fee on telephone customers going away altogether after this education initiative is completed.”

Superintendent of Public Instruction Diane Douglas applauded the funding of the Arizona Broadband for Education Initiative.

“Equal access to broadband services is critical to the success of a child’s education in the 21st century,” Douglas said. “This program is an incredible opportunity for underserved children from small schools in rural parts of Arizona to have the same technology opportunities that are afforded to other children in the state.”

Arizona was awarded the 2016 K-12 Broadband and Digital Learning Policy Academy grant last March through a partnership between the National Governor’s Association Center, EducationSuperHighway and the K-12 Broadband and Digital Learning Academy.

Since then, the superintendent and Arizona Department of Education staff have worked with all 15 counties to get schools to participate throughout the state. All counties already have a school moving forward with this initiative, and as many as 200 school districts and charter schools have applied for broadband services, Douglas said.

School districts will have to pay for the service, but through the matching funds most districts could get their entire construction cost paid for, according to the state’s education office.

While schools and libraries will benefit most, nearby rural businesses and government will likely also benefit, said Mark Goldstein, secretary and founding board member of the Arizona Telecommunications & Information Council.

“When a company like CenturyLink builds fiber to a school, they will get paid for a two-fiber cable and subsidized 100 percent, but 46 or 94 spare fiber strands will also be available,” said Goldstein, adding that telecommunications companies don’t just lay two cables in the ground. “The impact goes well beyond the K-12 schools and libraries.”

The fiber will be laid by the end of the year for up to 200 schools, with another 200 schools expected to get Internet next year, Goldstein said.

“The stars are aligning in a sense,” Goldstein said, who wrote the state’s strategic broadband plan in 2012 on behalf of the state government, but it never got adopted. “Arizona has never committed real dollars for broadband infrastructure, until now. This is a great way to remediate school and libraries’ lack of bandwidth in the rural areas.”

Hayley Ringle
Reporter
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