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Federal grants could help spread Internet

Kansas companies have applied for the grants to use for such things as providing rural Kansas with broadband access and providing Internet service in a community center.

BY DAN VOORHIS
The Wichita Eagle

A new federal program gives local companies and organizations a crack at millions of dollars to spread and improve broadband service in Kansas.

The National Telecommunications Information Authority is close to awarding \$5.5 billion in grants nationwide to expand and improve broadband Internet service to rural areas.

As much as half of Kansas is uncovered, particularly in western Kansas, estimates John Smith, a director for Wichita's Pixius Communications, one of the applicants.

The first group of grants likely will be awarded at the end of September and a second round by next summer.

Four Wichita applicants are among 29 Kansas and eight out-of-state companies and organizations to file for grants.

The purpose of the program is to bring broadband access to areas without service; improve broadband use in schools, community centers and libraries; improve the usefulness for police, fire and public safety agencies; and stimulate the economy.

In one of the most ambitious plans, Pixius Communications is asking for \$55.3 million to expand its broadband network to cover all areas in Kansas without service.

The company operates towers that broadcast Internet signals to rural households. It already provides service to dozens of towns in central and eastern Kansas, but this would be a dramatic expansion.

"We believe that the intent of Congress is to provide access to the Internet, no matter if they live in the middle of a tumbleweed field," Smith said. "They deserve access."

He said many people ask if a grant would simply allow the company to expand using government money.

It's true the grant would allow the company to save tens of millions in capital costs, he said. The company would make a profit from the statewide network, he said, but many parts of the state are so sparsely populated, the company would lose money even if it doesn't pay for the towers.

Another applicant is SyCom Services, a Wichita aircraft consulting firm.

Owner Michael McEwen is seeking \$11.7 million to fund an ambitious effort to eliminate underlying inefficiencies in the Internet.

McEwen said 30 percent of the capacity of the Internet is wasted.

Sunflower Broadcasting, which operates KWCH, Channel 12, and KSCW, Channel 33, submitted an application seeking \$3.5 million to build awareness about broadband and its uses through a marketing campaign, including television programming, training seminars and Web content.

The Oaklawn Improvement District is seeking \$42,589 to provide broadband service for education and job searching at the Oaklawn Community Center.

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