

CCSP talks broadband, renovations to downtown storefronts

By JOE PHELPS
Siftings Herald

Dr. Wesley Kluck spoke to the Economic Development Subcommittee of the Clark County Strategic Plan Monday about the possibility of bringing broadband Internet to all county residents.

Only residents in Arkadelphia and Caddo Valley now have access to the high-speed broadband Internet. Others in the county are limited to slower dial-up service.

Providing broadband to the entire county is the subcommittee's No. 1 priority for 2009, he said, after having studied the results of an electronic survey of about 300 county residents. "These are people who are used to having the Internet," Kluck, the subcommittee chair, said. Of the 300 surveyed, 40 percent said they do not have broadband and 98 percent said they would like to have faster Internet. Several others said they would like to be educated on the topic.

One of the major obstacles in providing county-wide broadband is the expense. Kluck said it would cost thousands just to run the lines to the Clark County Industrial Park in Gum Springs. Another issue is finding a willing provider, as AT&T is "not interested in expanding" its services to rural areas of the county.

With funding from the USDA, a Colorado-based company called Open Range has agreed to provide portable, 4G wireless services in cities in 17 states — and Arkadelphia is one of those 500 cities chosen. The groundwork for the service is expected to begin next year, Kluck said he asked one of the company's officials if they would be interested in providing the services to the rest of the county, but the official said only if the company could get 150 users within a mile or two radius of a tower. This option would not be possible with Clark County's scattered population.

Another option would be to wait on federal stimulus money, Kluck said. In order to receive stimulus money, an organization or entity would want to become a utility company to provide the services. Kluck said he contacted Clark County officials, but none were interested.

A Louisiana-based communications company could build a community center for residents to go to for high-speed Internet, and the deadline to write the grant is Aug. 14. Kluck said he hopes to have the grant submitted by next week.

Bill Wright, co-chair of the subcommittee, had two reports to share.

He said the Arkadelphia 2025 Commission has shown a desire to commit \$60,000 to downtown for storefront repairs. Wright said it has been over 10 years since the improvements have been made, and added that it is "depressing" to walk in downtown Arkadelphia. "The canopies look bad, the signage doesn't look good."

"We would like to see \$100,000 invested in downtown repairs, Wright said, noting that the grants would be matched by a loan. Any business that would be interested would have to spend the grant and loan money on storefront improvements, and only businesses in the downtown area would qualify. The border for downtown stretches from the 10th and Caddo streets intersection to the Ouachita River and south to Walnut Street. Wright said he has asked banks to reward low-interest loans to be matched "about 50/50" with the 2025 Commission grants.

Also, Southern Bancorp asked for a three-year grant to the Henderson State University Small Business and Technology Development Center for a FastTrac entrepreneurship program. The program would call for 10 training sessions in the county, and would directly impact the businesses already in the

county.

Arkadelphia City Manager Jimmy Bolt, who serves on the subcommittee, said the City of Arkadelphia is "very supportive" of the program, as it has funded it in the past.

Shawnie Carrier, executive director of the Arkadelphia Regional Economic Development Alliance, echoed Bolt's comment, adding that the entrepreneurship program is in line with the strategic blueprints Del Boyette outlined for the Economic Development Corp. of Clark County.

Wright said the \$30,000 grant would be divided into \$10,000 for each year. Lonnie Jackson, co-chair of the subcommittee, said he was also supportive of the grant, as the program has been offered in the county for six years in Arkadelphia, Gurdon and in Hot Springs.

In other business, Leslie Bright, director of marketing and communications for the EDCCC, reported that Leadership Clark County is about to begin its second nine-month program. The applications are due Aug. 14, and the program will kick off with an overnight retreat, Sept. 9-10, at Camp Winnamocka. So far, about 10 applications have been turned in.

Carrier reported that the Alliance is looking into relocating to an office on Pine Street. The office, located at Twin Oaks Plaza on the 2400 block of Pine Street, has five offices in the building's 1,900 square feet of space. "We've exhausted every possibility (of finding an office) in downtown," Carrier said, adding that the Alliance may be looking into a new building in the future. The new office will house Carrier, Bright, the Arkadelphia Area Chamber of Commerce and other chambers in the county. The Arkadelphia Area Chamber is currently located on the second floor of Town Hall. Bolt said city administrators are thinking about expanding their office space, allowing interns to work out of the Chamber office.

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