

High-speed Internet coming to rural area

By **David Lazenby**
The Cullman Times

Tue, Jun 10 2008

— The Cullman Electric Cooperative has launched a pilot project to give some rural residents a fast track on the Information Superhighway

Brian Lacy, the co-op communications coordinator, said the broadband over powerline (BPL) Internet service will be offered to its members served by the Berlin substation starting later this month.

Lacy said the service may benefit as many as 1,800 individuals who currently can only get Internet access through satellite service — and that's only if they have a clear view of the southern sky from their homes.

Cullman Electric Cooperative is doing the project in conjunction with an Alabama-based Internet service provider known as IBEC, an acronym for International Broadband Electric Communications. Last month, the power board did a survey of residents in the affected region of east central Cullman County to determine the desirability of BPL Internet access.

“We have done a survey to try to gauge the interest,” Lacy said.

Melissa Cartee, the co-op's vice president of member services and community development, said notification was sent by mail Monday to co-op members for whom the service will be made available this month.

Regardless of the results of the survey, Lacy said the co-op is committed to providing the BPL service. “We're going to put it out there,” Lacy said. “The people who live out there are right now really limited in what their choices are. That's one of the reasons the co-op is looking at this in the first place.”

Cartee concurred. “It's not just a pilot program to see if it's going to work or not, but it's a pilot program to determine how fast we're going to continue on with it,” she said.

Scott Lee, the CEO of IBEC, said he does not think of the project as a pilot program. He said it would be better described as “a demonstration for the full deployment.”

For now, Cullman Power Board is not following in the co-op's footsteps. General manager Mike Manning said currently the power board does not have plans to provide BPL service to the more than 8,200 homes it serves.

“We may choose to at a later time,” said Manning, who added BPL technology is still in development. Lacy touted the ways BPL is more convenient than other avenues of Internet access such as those that require access to phone line and cable outlets.

“It comes through the plugs in your house,” Lacy said. “It doesn't matter whether you're in the attic or if you're in the basement. If you have an outlet, and you plug your modem in, you have high-speed Internet access there.”

“It gives a lot more flexibility from the standpoint of portability,” Lee said.

Lacy said the only additional infrastructure needed to provide the service is regulators attached to area power polls that boost the Internet signal. This work, he said, would be done by the IBEC at no cost to the co-op.

Lacy said if the program is successful, the co-op plans to expand the service to other rural parts of the county that previously had few options for obtaining broadband access.

“If it's something that turns out to be a good thing, and it's feasible and something we feel will be to our members' benefit, then we would move forward and start working on bringing it to other portions of our service territory,” he said.

Although Lee said IBEC's initiative is geared toward rural residents, BPL may one day be provided

county-wide.

“If everything goes well with this deployment, we will be scheduling additional substations by August and if we get rolling in a year, year and a half, we could have all Cullman Electric (Cooperative) deployed, which covers about 40,000 homes,” Lee said.

A broadband Internet consumer facts portion of the Federal Communications Commission’s Web site, www.fcc.gov, states that “BPL speeds are comparable to DSL (Digital Subscriber Lines) and cable modem speeds.”

To use the service, Lacy said residents will be required to pay \$99 fee to purchase and activate a BPL modem. Lacy said an installation crew would deliver the modem with instructions.

According to IBEC’s Web site, ibec.net, monthly service fees start at \$29.95. Lacy said co-op members who use the service will be allowed to pay the fee through their monthly power bill.

Cartee said word-of-mouth from the co-op’s survey has generated interest in the service that resulted in several calls and e-mails to her office from interested customers.

“We think this is something that our membership has anxiously awaited for and we are anxiously awaiting for them to have it available,” Cartee said.

One county resident excited about the offering in Baileyton Councilor Joe Golden, who discussed the initiative and its subsequent phone survey at a June 2 Council meeting.

Golden said he would like to see the program extended to Baileyton.

“We’re trying to get across to the people there if you get a telephone call about this, give them positive feedback on it so we can possibly get this extended to us,” said Golden who said he also spoke to a co-op employee about getting Baileyton involved in the pilot program.

Previously Golden said he attempted to get high speed Internet at Baileyton through Charter Communications, the cable provider to the Baileyton area.

“They are absolutely not giving us anything to look forward to,” said Golden, who also contacted phone companies about providing DSL service to Baileyton. “We’ve sort of been in limbo,” Golden said.

Cartee said, “Rural America can’t get anything in some areas other than dial-up, so that’s what they’re interested in.”

“There is a huge, huge demand for broadband in rural America,” said Lee, who compared the desire to the demand for electricity in rural America in the 1930s.

Lyne Koker, Charter Communications’ director of governmental affairs, said currently, the company does not have plans to offer broadband Internet service to the area it serves in Cullman County.

Like the BPL service being offered by the co-op, Koker said Charter Communications Internet service starts at \$29.95.

Officials with Time Warner Cable, another area broadband Internet service provider, could not be reached for comment Monday.

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