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Markle eyes \$1.5 M internet project

Study shows fiber-optic network could increase property values, economic development

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Installing a high-speed, fiber-optic network in the Town of Markle is estimated to cost \$1.5 million, according to the feasibility study presented Wednesday that was commissioned by the town council in July.

The study, conducted by Yates Engineering Services LLC, showed many possibilities to obtain a fiber-

optic network, which could increase property values and drive economic development. The study was only the first step in the process of determining how to improve internet service in the town, and no vote or discussion has taken place to move forward.

The \$1.5-million option would cover the cost of fully developing the network to distribute service to the area,

approximately 655 homes.

"This is a very feasible build," Yates Engineering Services LLC President Bart Bretsch said.

Bretsch laid out four ways other rural areas in Indiana obtained fiber-optic service. He said there are ways to do the project without taking money from taxpayers or money out of the town's budget.

"The last thing is whether or not the town wants to do this themselves or basically make an environment that makes it irresistible for

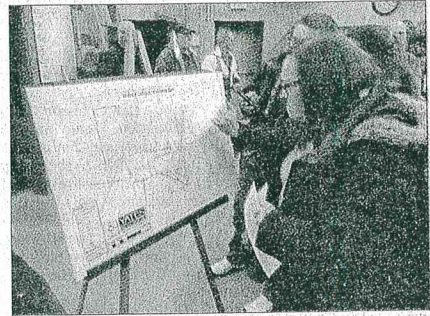


PHOTO BY ANDREW MACIEJEWSKI / Huntington Herald-Press

MAP: Residents look at the map that displays where the network would go and which streets it would connect to.

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somebody like Community Fiber to come in and do it for you," Bretsch said.

The first example was Richmond, where the council did a full installation and connected residents to the network, similar to the \$1.5-million option. The second example was Chesterton, where the council bought the materials and collaborated with a telecommunication company to build and maintain the network. The third example was Columbus, which laid the ducts into the ground and bid the project to telephone companies to fill the ducts with fiber and supply ser-

vice. The last example was Bloomington, which simply bid the entire project out promising incentives to any company that agreed to build and maintain the network.

Bretsch said the most successful projects normally don't involve a full network build, unless the municipality is capable of professionally building and maintaining internet service. Most successful projects use partial builds or other incentives to entice providers to invest.

Huntington County Economic Development CEO Mark Wickersham said he facilitated a project similar to the Bloomington example in the City of Huntington. He said they offered incentives to the company to encourage investment, and

now more than 70 percent of residents in Huntington use the fiber-optic service. Even those who didn't sign up for fiber-optic service saw benefits, since Wickersham said the project increased competition in the area and made Comcast and other providers voluntarily invest in improving their service and bandwidth to the town.

"It's a really, really helpful thing if you can find out how to engage with a project that stimulates competition as well as gets you the basic products you want," Wickersham said.

Bretsch said recent studies show property values increase by more than 3 percent when connected to a fiber-optic network. Wickersham said downtown

and home-based businesses along with education will benefit from the addition, since both rely on heavily on internet accessibility, especially since most students at HCCSC use iPads and web-based platforms to learn.

The Markle Fire Department was packed with community members who were anxious to see the plan materialize.

Community members said once students get off the bus, the entire town's Internet slows to a creep, since a majority of the town's Internet service is provided by DSL or wireless connection.

Business owners also complained that service has been down for more than five days at a time, in some cases, and one business owner said dur-

ing outages, she cannot open her register or access the cloud, which is a wireless database.

A worker from the nursing home said they use paperless systems to keep medical records for residents in the home, so when the Internet goes out, it's a major issue. Also, multiple residents said the current DSL provider is at full capacity and is not allowing new customers to sign up.

Bretsch said in order for the project to be feasible, a majority of the town has to sign up for service to pay back the cost and make the project economical for an Internet service provider to invest. The average cost of fiber-optic varies between \$60 and \$70, according to

project leaders.

Hundreds of surveys were completed at the end of the meeting, and the results of how many citizens are interested in moving forward with a project will be released at a further date.

Bretsch said it would take approximately four months to install the network if the town decided to have it built, but he said it could also take years to fully connect the town if an internet service provider is chosen to build the network, since it will most likely be done in phases to gauge profitability.

"If you get to that 40 percent interest level in the town, then this would probably happen organically," Bretsch said.