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Forum gets focus on Broadband

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PORTAGE -- Water. Electricity. Transportation. Access to broadband technology.

Northwest Indiana Forum officials unveiled what they called the first comprehensive look at the area's broadband capabilities and opportunities.

The Portage-based Forum is a privately funded economic development corporation for Lake, Porter, LaPorte and Starke counties.

"Broadband is a utility, much like water, like electricity and like roadways," said Brian Baker, of South Bend-based ComControl, the consultant that compiled the report.

"You use it to move things."

Simply put, broadband technology squeezes voice, video and data signals into digital bits that can be sent and received faster than typical analog signals that run on copper or coaxial cables. The technology also converts the digitized information into light pulses that shoot across glass-like fiber optic strands.

With a \$40,000 grant from Chase bank, the Forum commissioned the sizable study six months ago, said Mark Maassel, president and CEO of the Forum. The study ranged from broadband assets in place today to discussing how to get businesses, schools and residents across the region tapped into the technology.

"The questions is how do we, as a region, really connect to and become a part of the Information Age," Maassel told several dozen business and civic leaders. "What's our ability to connect to the rest of the world?"

Baker displayed maps with colored lines, like scraps of yarn, scattered across the region, except for the South Shore fiber line, or SSFL. That line, described as "dark fiber," slices across the northern part of the region and is a fiber optic line that offers high capacity and can be accessed by many users.

Other fiber optic lines include those dedicated to specific businesses and others that can be used by municipalities and educational institutions.

Some areas, like Michigan City, are already experimenting with ways of extending the fiber optic infrastructure to more businesses and residences. Expanding that to a geographic area as large as Northwest Indiana will take a great deal of collaboration and political will, Maassel said.

That will mean getting political, education, health care and business leaders to come up with a plan that meets the region's and their individual needs, he said.

"We're prepared to move right ahead" in taking the lead in the broadband movement, Maassel said of the Forum. "I think there's already a lot of understanding out there, but what we have to do is drive it to the next level."

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