

Blackfoot fires back at telecommunications consultant

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Contributed by: Admin

by Mark Hebert

Blackfoot Telecommunications fired back at a consultant this week, stating that Mineral County residents have “as good, if not better, high-speed Internet options than many major cities in the state.”

The local telephone and Internet provider responded to a Paul DeWolfe presentation at the regular monthly meeting of the BitterRoot RC&D in Superior last week.

DeWolfe, owner of Access Engineering in Missoula, emphasized the importance of telecommunications capacity to rural economic development during the meeting, stating that smaller rural communities need to have strong telecommunication infrastructures to attract new businesses.

On Tuesday, Blackfoot Telecommunications Group Vice President Bill Squires told the Chronicle that his company is committed to its customers and their communities.

“The issue of economic development in any of our rural communities is very important to us,” said Squires. “We spend a great deal of money trying to support our local communities and provide them with a network that they need to promote economic development.”

Squires said that he felt the article in the Chronicle last week may have given people in the area the idea that there are not adequate broadband Internet services in Mineral County to attract outside business to the area. He said he strongly disagreed.

“We’ve got fiber optic facilities out there to all the area out there, including St. Regis and Superior,” he said. “We have invested about \$24 million in the last five years to do that and \$92 million in the last 15 years to get fiber out to those facilities.”

Squire said that Blackfoot has the largest managed Ethernet facility in Western Montana, adding that he feels that the people in Superior and St. Regis have access to greater broadband facilities than some Montana cities, naming Bozeman and Billings.

On the topic of redundancy, Squire said there are two aspects to consider.

First, if out-of-state businesses feel they need two large broadband providers, it is accurate that Mineral County is lacking in that field.

“I believe that it’s true that there is not another company in Superior, for instance, that can provide the capabilities that we can,” he said. “That is certainly an issue that all of the rural areas deal with, not just in Montana, but across the country because it is very expensive to put those type of services out there.”

Squires added that due to high costs, the prospects are remote that a different company will offer the same services that Blackfoot currently provides to the area.

A second meaning for redundancy refers to the underlying network hardware. For example, if a fiber optic cable is mistakenly severed by a construction crew, would users lose or preserve their connection to services?

Squires said that two years ago, if said cable was damaged, that Blackfoot customers in the area would have lost their connection, but not any more.

“We’ve got a fiber ring that essentially goes east out of Missoula, circles all the way back up north around Seeley Lake and Kalispell and then circles back down Highway 93,” he said. “And that’s a redundancy fiber ring. If that’s cut someplace, then the traffic reverses direction and gets back to Missoula.”

The company is currently finishing up another fiber ring that will provide network redundancy for Mineral County.

“So there is the ability to provide route redundancy up in the Superior and St. Regis areas as well as the rest of the Clark Fork Valley,” he pointed out.

It was reported at the RC&D meeting that two companies contacted Mineral County asking about property prices, income taxes and the communications infrastructure, hoping to bring about 75 new jobs to the area. They shied away from Mineral County due to the lack of broadband providers.

Squires said that as far as he knows, Blackfoot was never contacted about the redundancy issues in Mineral County and that Blackfoot, even three years ago, had the capability to put up some redundant service.

“We’ve done that in some of our other exchanges where companies have moved in and needed that type of service.” Squires said. “It’s never out of the question. But, like I said, if they are looking for redundant providers, then that’s always going to be an issue in rural areas.”

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