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McKenzie River Reflections
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Broadband gaining boost to “backbone”

LEABURG: “The first work we’re doing with the Connect America program is in this area,” were welcome words heard by a packed audience last Thursday night. They came from Karen Stewart, CenturyLink’s director of local government affairs, who was talking about a federally backed program to upgrade McKenzie area broadband service that is already underway. Asked for a completion date she said, “September, unless we run into construction problems.”

Under the wing of the Federal Communications Commission, the Connect America project is designed to accelerate infrastructure construction to reach some of the 23 million people who currently can’t connect at speeds of at least 10 Mbps (megabits per second of data transfer) downloading and 1 Mbps to upload. CenturyLink accepted those funds for Oregon, committing to complete the project in the state within six years.

Details of the project will include building a new ten-mile section of fiber optic line linking three remote terminals located east of the central office in Blue River. In addition, two other remote terminals will be fed from the Leaburg central office fiber.

Not all residences can expect to see improvements, although most will. Existing copper lines will feed homes, noted Jason Johannasen, Eugene operations manager for CenturyLink. “When you deploy high speed internet over copper facilities distance will tell you what speed you will get,” he said.

Marilyn Cross, one of the organizers of the meeting at the McKenzie Fire & Rescue training center, said that there might still be pockets of the region, like the Deerhorn and Goodpasture Road areas, that won’t see marked improvements. “We also have needs for the school and the clinic this isn’t going to solve,” she added. “It may come close for part of the solution but we still don’t know that yet.”

Other areas to explore could include linking into some other fiber networks. There are two in the area with extra capacity. One is owned by the Eugene Water & Electric Board and goes to Leaburg Dam for a microwave link to the Carmen Smith hydro project. The other, a US Army Corps fiber line, connects to Cougar Dam.

Another meeting is planned in the coming months to form a committee and identify additional programs and grants. People interested in more information can email mckenziecommunitydevelopment@gmail.com.