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## PUD has piece of regional fiber pie

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By Fred Willenbrock, The Pend Oreille Miner



NEWPORT – All Pend Oreille County eyes are on the PUD’s contractors stringing fiber to every home and business in the county’s south end as they race to start hook ups this fall. But equally important to the region is fiber being strung in eastern Washington and north Pend Oreille County by a non-profit corporation partly owned by the Pend Oreille Public Utility District (PUD).

Northwest Open Access Network (NoaNet) is using funds from two federal American Reinvestment and Recovery Act grants to build fiber networks from Okanogan County through

NoaNet is expanding Washington state’s broadband network to reach more than 170 communities and 2,000 schools, hospitals, emergency responders, libraries, colleges and universities. A line from Tonasket past Colville is under construction, and a route from near Metaline to Cusick is in the planning stage. (Courtesy map|NoaNet)

Ferry and Stevens counties and north Pend Oreille County. Like the PUD they are only a wholesale provider of broadband services, and like the PUD they are moving into many rural areas that are without high-speed Internet access.

Their system is much like the early PUD network – connecting libraries, hospitals and public entities. They won’t see fiber to homes and businesses like Pend Oreille County in this phase of the project.

For Pend Oreille County, which is ahead of most rural eastern Washington counties on fiber network development, NoaNet’s latest projects will provide several large benefits here. They will run a fiber line over Tiger Pass from Colville to Metaline Falls. It will run down LeClerc Creek Road on the east side of the Pend Oreille River to Cusick and tie into the PUD system. It will eventually open the door to broadband service in the north county, but when complete it immediately offers a second route out of the county to Seattle.

The PUD couldn’t include the north county in the \$27 million federal grant the district is using to build

the south county fiber network because the federal government already has given a grant to a private company serving that area, Pend Oreille Telephone.

The PUD line now runs south on Highway 2 to Spokane. Having a backup connection to the web is an important part of fiber networks. So if the route to Spokane, that the PUD uses now goes down, they can reroute on the NoaNet line to Seattle.

The PUD will get use of the new NoaNet system without charge. They will contribute \$335,000 to the north county construction project. The PUD line to Spokane, which was originally built with the help of Seattle City Light, also gives NoaNet a backup route.

A fiber line will be built running south through Okanogan County to the NoaNet system in the middle of the state to complete the loop to Seattle.

The Kalispel Tribe is one of several cities and tribes that are NoaNet partners on the stimulus grant project and will end up with a fiber connection at their public safety building on their reservation near Usk. The tribe has also contributed cash to the project.

The PUD joined NoaNet's 10 other public utility district partners about 10 years ago shortly after the PUD had built its backbone along its new north-south transmission line. The NoaNet system was first intended to allow the districts to communicate amongst each other about power supply issues. Eventually they included the Bonneville Power Administration fiber system.

NoaNet members soon realized they would need money to build a system that would gain the big users that would help pay for maintenance and eventual rebuilding. So they borrowed \$27 million. At the time, Pend Oreille PUD had 3.91 percent of the ownership and the risk. The PUD helped pay the debt and operations cost in the early years.

Pend Oreille PUD Director of Finance John Jordan has been a NoaNet board member for almost 10 years. He said the debt is down to about \$14 million and NoaNet is self sufficient, paying off the debt and maintaining its system.

Today, the nonprofit, wholesale provider of broadband has more than 1,800 fiber miles serving nearly 260,000 people in rural and underserved areas. It is a big reason that the giant server farms have been able to locate in the center of the state.

Jordan said there was debate then as now about whether public entities should be in businesses with the associated risk. But he believes that if they hadn't built the system many areas in the state wouldn't have broadband today.

This debate surfaced again recently when two of the NoaNet member PUDs left because of the risk associated with taking the stimulus grants to build out the system. They were Chelan and Douglas county PUDs.

Jordan said since they left the Pend Oreille PUD ownership and associated risk has risen to 4.77 percent.

Today, Jordan said the state of Washington is taking notice of the large communications network NoaNet has built throughout the state.

Joe Onley, manager of the Community Network System for the Pend Oreille PUD, said, "NoaNet had great vision."

Onley said the PUD had its backbone system via the fiber on the transmission line running through the county and south to Spokane when NoaNet gave them a good way to hook into the web. Now this partnership is giving them redundancy and an expanded backbone in north Pend Oreille County.