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Governor hails completion of \$140 million broadband network in Washington

Published: October 30th, 2013

By Walla Wall Union-Bulletin (Reporting by Rafael Guerrero of the Yakima Herald-Republic)

YAKIMA — Gov. Jay Inslee called it a “hidden gem.” Another called it “smokin’ fast.” Simply put: Broadband Internet access is now faster, more useful and more readily available to many in the Yakima Valley from here on out.

Inslee was one of several officials in attendance at Yakima Valley Community College on Tuesday afternoon, touting and celebrating the completion of a massive three-year, \$140 million dollar project that will bring much faster Internet to schools, libraries, law enforcement agencies and other public and private entities statewide.

“We are one of the most wired states in the nation, and that’s just not because of the coffee,” joked Inslee.

The expansion of the broadband infrastructure was made possible by Northwest Open Access Network, or NoaNet. The Olympia-based nonprofit was funded with two federal grants totaling \$140 million secured in 2010 from the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program, as part of the federal stimulus. Connecting rural areas to high-speed Internet has been a high priority in the Obama administration’s infrastructure initiatives.

The grants, along with additional matching funds of about \$47 million from NoaNet and public agencies, have funded the underground construction of more than 1,000 miles of fiber optic cable to rural and less-populated areas statewide. Yakima County received about \$5 million in funds to install the cables.

NoaNet completed major construction in the Valley and elsewhere last month. Construction locally included bringing in 21 miles of fiber to Sunnyside, Mabton, Grandview and Toppenish, and the Yakima County Sheriff’s Office substation at Zillah Lakes. Another phase of construction involved installing an additional 30 miles of new fiber to White Swan and Harrah and along Interstate 82 from Yakima to Grandview. One goal was to increase the broadband connection of YVCC and its Grandview campus from 10 megabits to 100 megabits.

The governor said he was excited about the numerous opportunities and benefits the roughly 1,600 miles of fiber networks of improved connections statewide will have for schools, hospitals, farming and other industries.

As a member of Congress, Inslee lobbied with federal officials to get the funds, one of the largest disbursements to any state.

Having lived north of Selah for two decades early on in his political and law career, he said he is a big fan of any new initiative that can help small communities.

“It is underground, but its results are above ground,” he said. “In every place, it reaches about 500 communities from Asotin to Zillah and places between.”

For the governor, it was also good to be back in the Valley, a place he once called home. He recalled his time teaching at YVCC.

“All 1,600 miles, that is great,” Inslee said. “But the last mile out to here — to Yakima — is the best. Let’s celebrate it.”

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