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ALERT TOP STORY

Officials celebrate groundbreaking on Northern Neck broadband project

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Gov. Ralph Northam (center) is flanked by state and federal officials at Thursday's groundbreaking.

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mong the many local, state and federal officials who gathered in Warsaw on Thursday to break ground on a fiber optic broadband project were King George County supervisors Annie Cupka and Cathy Binder.

Like others who represented residents of the Northern Neck, utility companies or state and federal agencies, the King George officials posed for photos, holding ceremonial shovels filled with dirt.

But because that spade full of soil represents “a huge step in bringing access to the underserved residences and businesses in our community,” Cupka said King George will memorialize the moment. The two shovels and a photo from the groundbreaking event for the Northern Neck Broadband Initiative will be framed in a shadowbox and displayed in the county boardroom.

“I am enormously grateful for the efforts from all of our partners and government officials who worked to make this happen,” said Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Cupka.

She recalled the “frustration and hopelessness from many of our citizens when they completed a broadband survey” a few years ago.

“The pandemic obviously put a huge spotlight on what we already knew: reliable broadband access is critical to attracting businesses, supporting our workforce, providing telehealth opportunities and allowing for remote learning if the circumstances require it,” Cupka said.

Gov. Ralph Northam was among dignitaries who celebrated the project that will bring high-speed internet to almost 7,200 unserved households and businesses in King George, Westmoreland, Richmond and Northumberland counties.

“We need to think big to make universal broadband a reality in our commonwealth,” the governor said, “and this regional initiative is exactly the type of unique partnership that will deliver on this promise.”

The initiative has brought a lot of partners and funding sources to the table. About \$20 million has been generated from state and federal grants, with each of the four counties chipping in \$650,000. King George offered up a larger chunk—\$500,000—last year so it would be first in line to get the high-speed service.

King George has 1,800 of the homes and businesses in the Northern Neck identified as lacking reliable and fast internet, according to county officials. With construction of the main line starting this month, installations are expected around October for pre-registered customers. Officials expect to complete the project by December 2023.

The first phase will use a \$10 million grant from the Virginia Telecommunication Initiative.

Dominion Energy is installing more than 200 miles of fiber from Fredericksburg to Kilmarnock, which will serve as the backbone for the project. Then, All Points Broadband, an internet service provider, will lease the “middle-mile” cable installed by Dominion Energy and put in the “last mile” portion of the network this fall, according to a press release.

Northern Neck Electric Cooperative will work with Dominion and All Points to extend the network.

Officials with all the companies involved praised the Northern Neck initiative as “a model of what can be achieved” when partners come up with new ways of thinking, said Jimmy Carr, CEO of All Points Broadband.

Officials from the electricity and internet service companies, along with representatives from the four counties, announced the agreement in April 2020. Lancaster and Middlesex counties later joined the regional initiative.

More than 90 percent of the fiber optic cable will be attached to electric poles, except in areas where lines are underground, Carr told King George officials last month.

Northern Neck residents can find out more about the project—and if their location is part of the initial phase—at **fiber.allpointsbroadband.com**.

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I've been lucky enough to be a newspaper reporter for more than 40 years, covering everything from human-interest stories to medical news, farming to fracking, personal columns to county government.
