West Virginia:
Grant could bring broadband to rural Jefferson Co

By RICHARD F. BELISLE
AUGUST 17, 2009

CHARLES TOWN, W.Va. — A partnership between Jefferson County Schools and American Public University System in Charles Town, W.Va., has until Thursday to submit an application for an $11 million federal grant to install a wireless broadband computer network that will bring the county into the information age.

The grant, if approved, would come through the U.S. Department of Commerce as stimulus money aimed at expanding broadband accessibility around the nation, especially in rural areas where access to the Internet is limited.

If the application is successful, Jefferson County's system could be a model for other areas of the country.

"We've spent hundreds and hundreds of hours since March on this application," said John Hough, associate provost for external affairs at American Public University System.

Also helping with the draft were Nathan Gageby of the school district's technology department, and Tracy Woods, director of information technology at American Public University, plus representatives of the county's library system and county government staffers.

The broadband system would link all 21 school buildings, the county's nine EMS stations and fire companies, the county's four libraries and three community centers with wireless, high-speed Internet, Hough said.

The school system is the primary applicant, he said.

The infrastructure, or "backbone," will link all the buildings into a single point-to-point system. Each building will be connected to the wireless system through a pizza box-sized receiver.

The system will allow for the development of an online education program for the schools, libraries and American Public University.

Most importantly, Hough said, it will bring access to students and their families who, because of their income limitations, do not have it now.

"Many kids, especially those eligible for the free lunch program, don't have a computer at home. There are pockets of them all around the county," Hough said. "These kids will be given a laptop that they can use in school and take home with them. They and their parents can be hooked up to the Internet."

The system will improve communication between emergency services and fire departments, since all of those buildings will be connected.

As for the libraries, each will have a bank of wireless computers for patrons' use.

Anyone on the system whose computer is within a mile of any of the buildings will be able to log on, Hough said. The network could potentially reach more than 65 percent of all county residents without additional or special equipment needed.

About $2 million of the grant money will be used to train and teach people how to best use the system, Hough said.

A public awareness program will be launched to promote the new system and inform residents about the power of broadband.