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LOCAL NEWS

Cinergy MetroNet coming to Wabash

By Roy Church
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Fiber-optic broadband service is coming to Wabash.

Cinergy MetroNet was introduced to the community several years ago.

Steve Biggerstaff announced the company is opening an office in Wabash and planning to invest up to \$20 million in fiber-optic cable to service Wabash and North Manchester.

The company is planning to begin constructing its fiber-optic network later this summer, but workers have been in the area for some time engineering plans for the service.

"We would hope to be offering service to some parts of Wabash by the end of the year," Biggerstaff said.

Why Wabash County?

The closest Cinergy MetroNet service is in Greencastle, located southwest of Indianapolis in Putnam County. Wabash will be the company's first city north of Indianapolis.

"I consider Wabash to be the hub of the north," Biggerstaff, the company's former president who now sits on its board and serves as a consultant, told the Plain Dealer. He retired from Cinergy/Duke Energy after 33 years.

After Wabash and North Manchester, the company plans to move into Huntington, and then go back down south to pick up Connersville, New Castle and Bedford.

"We actually moved Wabash up on the list because of its supportive and aggressive attitude toward economic development in the community," Biggerstaff, a former economic developer himself, said.

"I see a corridor between Fort Wayne and Lafayette. U.S. 24 is the connector and Wabash is right in the middle. We have also talked with officials in Peru and Logansport.

"While we will hire only 10 people," he added, "with this new technology we help provide leverage for the workforce here multiple times over. This new infrastructure is an economic development tool. It will help retain existing jobs and attract new technology jobs.

“It will help transition Indiana’s economy from a manufacturing base to a technology base. It is absolutely required for the transfer of information.”

Cinergy MetroNet will operate its business office for Wabash, North Manchester and Huntington here and also have a retail store.

On the back of its building, there will be a pre-cast concrete building to house \$1.5 million worth of equipment to operate the initial three-pronged package to be offered Wabash area customers.

There will also be a small office in North Manchester and another equipment hut for up to \$1.5 million more equipment.

“All employees will be hired locally,” Biggerstaff said.

Armed with a \$106 million loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cinergy MetroNet began installing fiber-optic cable in Greencastle in 2004. It began the process in North Vernon in December of last year. Work associated with the loan has to be in communities of 20,000 or less.

According to the company’s Web site, Cinergy MetroNet “is a customer-focused company providing feature-rich telephone services, high-speed Internet access and advanced cable television service.

“Cinergy MetroNet is bringing new technologies to a number of under-served areas. By working closely with leaders of rural communities across the heartland, Cinergy MetroNet is providing state-of-the-art technologies and services that are comparable or superior to those offered in large metropolitan areas.”

Headquartered in Evansville, Cinergy MetroNet has offices and retail stores in Greencastle, Madison, North Vernon, Seymour and Vincennes. The company is also talking with city and economic development officials in Columbia City, Plymouth, Warsaw and Lebanon.

“We were more than willing to introduce them to our counterparts in Columbia City,” said Bill Konyha, president and CEO of the Economic Development Group of Wabash County. “We’ve also introduced POET officials to at least two other communities.”

Konyha also noted that when the Hoosier Heartland Industrial Corridor is completed companies will be able to unload cargo at the deep ports in Toledo, Ohio, access I-69 and I-65 and deliver to the ports along the Gulf of Mexico and all cities along the way.

“Fiber-optic service and broadband access are critical to our ability to transition to a knowledge-based economy,” Konyha said. “And this knowledge-based economy we include logistics and distribution, and advanced manufacturing.

“Without broadband service we don’t have a prayer. It is absolutely vital.”

Konyha went on to say the new service is also critical to the new hospital, wherever officials decide to build it.

“This helps us level the playing field with the larger cities,” Konyha went on to say, “and elevates us above communities our own size.”

“This is going to let us hook up to the world,” Mayor Bob Vanlandingham said. “It’s going to give our residents another option for their in-home services and it’s going to greatly enhance our economic development capabilities. This is going to tie us in more efficiently with the rest of the world.

“It is just one more example of how good things happen when people work together,” he added.

Cinergy MetroNet is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Q-Comm Corp. and Duke Energy is a stockholder in Q-Comm, located in Lincoln, Neb.

“We will offer the residents of Wabash and North Manchester four things,” Biggerstaff said. “We offer fiber-optic service to your home or business, very competitive prices (at or below the competition), a local office and economic development leverage. Our competitors may offer one, two, maybe even three of those, but none offer all four.

“When I first visited Wabash four or five years ago, your mayor (Vanlandingham) made a statement I just love. He said, ‘Wabash is a place where you can telecommute to anywhere.’

“You already have that quality of life that makes people want to live here,” Biggerstaff said. “We want to make the telecommuting easier, faster, better.”