



opportunityreturns

Creating more jobs for today and tomorrow

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

Rod R. Blagojevich – Governor

news

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GOVERNOR BLAGOJEVICH ANNOUNCES GRANT TO INCREASE ACCESS TO INTERNET AND PROMOTE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY IN RURAL SOUTHERN REGION COMMUNITIES

SPRINGFIELD – Governor Rod Blagojevich announced today that West Frankfort is receiving a technology grant in the amount of **\$50,000** as part of his *Opportunity Returns* plan for creating jobs and promoting economic growth throughout the Southern region. The grant is part of an innovative pilot program known as the *Wireless Community Networks: Access to 21st Century Technologies for Underserved Communities* (WCN), a grassroots initiative designed to bring the Internet, along with the economic, social and political opportunities it affords, to individuals who live in low-income neighborhoods. The program is deploying a network capable of delivering high-speed, low-cost Internet service to households, small businesses, and other community institutions in a manner that is scaleable, replicable, and self-sustaining.

“As we strive to realize our goal of building an Illinois with more widespread economic opportunity, we must continue to expand access to critical technology and communication resources like the Internet, especially in rural communities that the information superhighway has bypassed. This innovative grant will bring high-speed wireless Internet into the homes of West Frankfort residents, giving them a key tool they need to excel in today’s society, while raising the economic capacity of the entire community,” Governor Blagojevich said.

The WCN project will build a wireless community network in West Frankfort. The network is based on a “mesh” network model, which allows participants to be outside the line-of-sight of network antennae using low-cost WI-FI technology. John A. Logan College, an open-enrollment community college that serves five rural Southern Illinois counties, will serve as the project’s anchor institution. Working through the anchor institution, the project will provide broadband Internet access to more than 1,000 households and small businesses.

The grant is being administered by a partnership between the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and the Office of Illinois Lieutenant Governor Pat Quinn. The state funding will leverage \$675,000 in federal spending and an additional \$400,000 in private investment to support a total of four wireless community network projects statewide. \$150,000 in additional state funding is going towards three network projects located in the Northeast region communities of Pilsen, North Lawndale, and Elgin. The Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT), a community organization that strives to develop tools to enhance the viability and sustainability of low and moderate-income communities, will coordinate and manage the overall WCN project.

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“Access to high speed Internet is the key to the economic empowerment in the 21st Century,” said Lieutenant Governor Pat Quinn. “Illinois cannot afford to leave any community or neighborhood behind when it comes to connecting businesses and citizens to the Internet.”

“Expanding economic opportunity begins with giving communities the critical tools they need to further their education and pursue better jobs. Governor Blagojevich understands that the Internet is a tremendous vehicle to access these tools. Expanding its availability and affordability will play an enormous role in allowing our citizens to realize their limitless individual potential and for this region to realize its profound economic potential,” State Senator Gary Forby (D-Benton) said.

Studies show that those most likely to be without home computers and access to the Internet are low-income and minority communities. According to the most recent report by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration:

- 75% of households with less than \$15,000 annual income and 67% of households with income between \$15,000 and \$30,000 do not use the Internet, while 86% of households with an income of \$75,000 or above use the Internet.
- 68% of Latinos and 60% of African-Americans are not online, while 55% of whites are online.

“Reliable access to the Internet is really imperative to fostering economic growth and a better standard of living in low-income and rural communities. We’re thrilled that we were able to bring this innovative program to the West Frankfort. Wireless Internet represents the future of how we will communicate in the workplace and in our homes. Thanks to this grant, West Frankfort will be brought to the cutting edge of technology and positioned to reap the many educational and economic advantages that come with it,” DCEO Director Jack Lavin said.

Even at the lowest speeds, WI-FI is faster than the typical DSL connection. Wireless networks not only offer high-speed, low-cost access, they require minimal infrastructure computers with a WI-FI card, repeating access points, and a main access point connected to a high-speed Internet source.

To help the anchor institutions remain sustainable, John A. Logan College will be committed to the development of a fee-based operating structure to ensure network self-sufficiency. While some of the target households in the community are facing difficult financial circumstances, market research shows that many of the households are willing to re-budget to support a network in their community that delivers affordable access. A preliminary break-even analysis indicates that a network would be self-sustaining at approximately \$10 a month.

Governor Blagojevich’s *Opportunity Returns* regional economic development plan is the most aggressive, comprehensive approach to creating jobs in Illinois’ history. Since a one-size-fits-all approach to economic development just doesn’t work, the Governor has divided the state into 10 regions – finding areas with common economic strengths and needs, and developing a plan with specific actions for each region. This grassroots effort for the Southern region is a product of significant outreach over several months with business, civic and labor leaders, and elected officials. The more than 40 specific projects that the Governor announced last November for Southern Illinois are designed to be flexible and effective. This plan is tailored to deliver real results that local businesses will see, feel, and, hopefully, profit from.

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