

Medina wiring plan raises static

Cable firm objects to county's fiber-optics vision

Friday, July 07, 2006

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Medina- Medina County plans to string an 88-mile fiber-optic ring through the heart of the county, a move that officials hope will give them an edge in landing new industries.

But detractors question whether the plan is needed at all. Armstrong Cable and Time Warner representatives argue that they have already installed fiber-optic cable in parts of the county.

Karen Wolff, general manager of Armstrong Cable's Medina office, contacted the Ohio Taxpayers Association, which has threatened to sue if the county goes ahead with the fiber-optic ring and turns it over to the Medina County Port Authority.

The \$7.23 million plan would put high-speed computer service on the doorsteps of virtually every county government office, school and library in the county. It also would be available to major businesses and industries and large areas of land ready for industrial development, said James Doust, executive director of the Medina County Economic Development Authority.

The plan calls for the county to pay for the network by selling tax-free bonds that would be retired through user fees. The county would invite proposals from companies to install and operate the ring.

Medina County would become the second county in Ohio to build a fiber-optic network. Butler County, in southwest Ohio, has completed a 100-mile fiber-optic ring through Hamilton, Middletown and Oxford, home to Miami University.

That project, just north of Cincinnati, has been mired in lawsuits and an FBI investigation, according to the Cincinnati Enquirer.

For years, Medina County has struggled to compete with surrounding counties for new industries.

It has lacked foreign-trade zones, a port authority and a university to attract development.

Doust said the county is about a year from closing the gap.

In August, four foreign-trade zones will open for manufacturers in parts of Brunswick, Sharon Township, Seville and Wadsworth. The 54-acre University of Akron Medina County Center and Business Technology Park in Lafayette Township is scheduled to open next year.

Doust said the county hopes to capture "a modest number of businesses" within the first three years of creating the fiber-optic ring. No attempt has been made to shut out or even compete with the cable and telephone services, he said.

"We offered numerous times for them to partner with us, and that door is still open," Doutt said.

After a hearing June 14, John Guran, senior director for commercial services for Time Warner Cable, said he worries that another company could buy the system cheaply if the county venture fails.

Medina County residents received recorded telephone messages in June from the Ohio Taxpayers Association accusing county commissioners of trying to create the fiber-optic ring to benefit well-connected people and industries.

"That's a lie," Doutt said. "That's a bald-faced lie."

Scott Pullins, chairman of the association, said the Medina fiber-optic loop will be obsolete the day it opens because of rapid advances in the technology.

Pullins said his association might stage a referendum drive to put the issue on the ballot.

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