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# Socket gets money for broadband

## Stimulus award goes for Callaway project.

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Thousands of households and businesses in Callaway County soon will be able to leap the digital divide thanks to \$23.7 million in federal funding that Columbia telephone and Internet service provider Socket has been awarded.

The funding will allow Socket to build a fiber-optic network in the Fulton and Millersburg areas. Work is expected to commence in 90 days and take about 31 months to complete, contingent on when government officials release the funds.

Socket co-owner Carson Coffman said yesterday his company is the recipient of a \$16.6 million grant and a \$7.12 million loan from the Rural Utilities Service's Broadband Initiatives Program. The award

choice between dial-up, DSL and satellite Internet.

Coffman said the funding is going to bring high-speed Internet service to 3,033 households in Callaway County. About half of those households are in Fulton; the rest either surround that city or are near Millersburg. Subscribers will have access to telephone, video and broadband Internet access services at an affordable price, according to the Socket website.

Coffman also noted Socket's application included numerous "critical community institutions" — such as libraries, emergency responder facilities, schools and nursing homes — that will benefit from having access to high-speed broadband. "We tried to put together a recipe of underserved households and critical community institutions," he explained.

According to a description of the project on the USDA website, 260 businesses and 36 community institutions stand to bene-

is part of \$7.2 billion in stimulus funding U.S. lawmakers appropriated when they passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The Rural Utilities Service is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"The program is set up to stimulate the economy and push broadband into rural, underserved areas," Coffman said.

To date, 776 applications have been submitted and another 600 are pending. Socket is one of 126 grant recipients announced yesterday. Cumulatively, 231 projects have been funded through this program, with more announcements anticipated.

To get the grant, Socket's employees demonstrated the money would serve communities that didn't have access to high-speed broadband, even if customers were willing to pay for it. Christa Talmage, a Socket spokeswoman, said most of the people and businesses in the area have the

fit. Also, Socket's project is anticipated to create 525 jobs up front. To earn the grant, Coffman said his team assembled hundreds of pages and worked on the project for a year.

The news is already being well received in Fulton.

"I think it's great for Callaway County," said Matt Harline, assistant to the director of administration for the city of Fulton.

He noted in some places in his region, dial-up Internet service is the only affordable choice available.

"At a nearby landfill, dial-up is all that's available there," Harline said. "It's frustrating. It's very difficult for them to access information they can use, and it's hard to send e-mail."

Many people, including Harline, are comparing the installation of rural fiber-optic networks to the work performed by the Rural Electrification Administration in the 1930s. "It's a good analogy," he said.