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High tech communications coming soon to many Callaway residents

Socket Telecom receives \$16.6 M federal grant

By **DON NORFLEET**
The **Fulton Sun**

High tech communications using state-of-the-art fiber optic technology will arrive soon to about 6,500 rural Callaway County residents.

High-speed Internet, high definition television, local and long distance telephone service will be included in the services.

A \$16.6 million federal grant was approved Wednesday to help fund a \$23.7 million project to build high speed fiber optic Internet connections to many Callaway County residents. Many Fulton residents, institutions and businesses also will benefit from the new service.

The federal stimulus fund grant went to Socket

Telecom LLC of Columbia. The firm had applied for the money last year but was not included in the first round of funding.

Carson Coffman, Socket co-owner and vice president of sales and marketing, said Wednesday he is delighted that his firm's application for the Rural Utility Service grant was approved by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). In addition to the \$16.6 million federal grant, Socket also received a \$7.1 million loan from the USDA to make up its 30 percent share of the total cost of the \$23.7 million project.

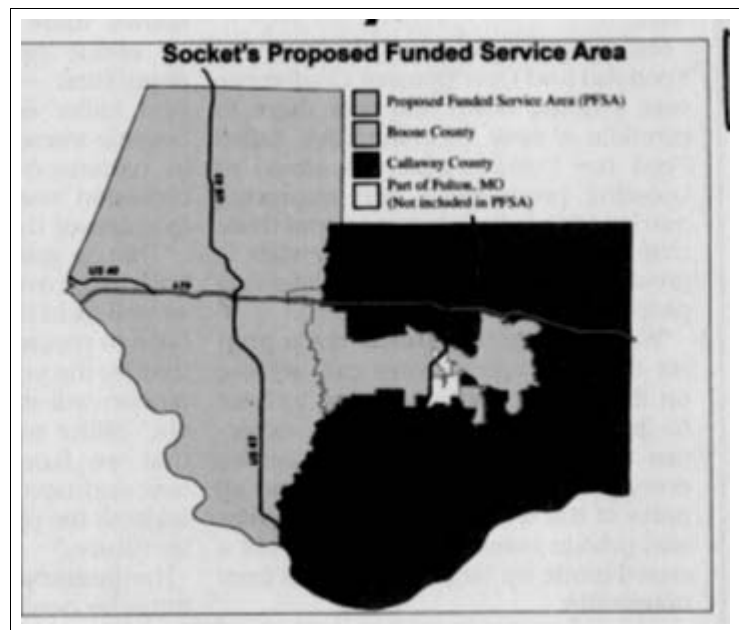
The Callaway County area to be served by Socket with high speed fiber optic lines includes all of Millersburg, the rural area between Fulton and Millersburg, and north along Business 54. That would be the main artery but the network would extend out to pick up what are identified as critical institutions.

The proposed service area would include about 20 percent of Fulton. It also would include many critical institutions, especially those along Route F to Millersburg. This area includes Callaway Community Hospital, Missouri Department of Social Services, Callaway County Ambulance District, Westminster College, William Woods University, Fulton City Hall, Callaway County Courthouse, Missouri School for the Deaf, Fulton State Hospital, Fulton Reception and Diagnostic Center, Fulton High School, and the Missouri National Guard.

Coffman said he expects the list of Fulton institutions to expand as the project evolves. He said Socket already has many

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telephone subscribers in Fulton, including many institutions.

The service area includes a small sliver on the eastern edge of Boone County but 92 percent of the area served is in Callaway County, Coffman said.

Kingdom City and Auxvasse are not included in the project.

The project area was chosen based on its current mix of homes that are under-served for high-speed Internet service.

The federal stimulus money was granted to help extend fiber optic telephone, high definition video television service, and Internet service to 3,000 homes and 6,500 Callaway County residents as well as an estimated 260 businesses and 36 community institutions.

Even areas of Fulton with current high speed connections could benefit from fiber

optic technology if Socket's service passes through their location.

Coffman said institutions that now receive broadband service through another carrier will be able to switch carriers to Socket if desired.

Coffman said Socket will be able to compete for service at many Fulton institutions and businesses.

The \$23,734,482 grant and loan to Socket will offer Fiber-to-the-Premise (FTTP) service to households, businesses, and critical community organizations that are currently under-served in Callaway County. It will offer true 21st-century telecommunications with speeds up to 20Mbps.

Socket estimates the project will directly support 525 jobs upfront, and will also drive economic development and create jobs for decades to come.

Coffman said Socket hopes to break ground on the project in 90 days. Building

the entire network will take about 30 months, he said.

In competition with cable, telephone and satellite firms, Socket will provide access with fiber optic technology to HD video television service with 100 plus channels, high-speed Internet and local and long-distance telephone service.

Coffman said as future technologies mature, Socket plans to bring tele-medicine, distant learning and home security platforms.

Coffman said the federal grant is needed to bring fiber optic high speed Internet service to rural areas because of the high cost of providing

service to homes and businesses with wide distances between them. He compared installing fiber optic cable in rural areas to the Rural Electric Administration (REA) system that brought electricity to farms and rural areas in the 1930s. It is not be profitable for many private utilities because of

the long distances between connections.

Coffman said the cost of installing fiber optic cable could range from \$50,000 to \$75,000 per mile.

Nationwide, \$1.2 billion will be invested in the 126 broadband infrastructure projects through funding made available through the Recovery Act. An additional \$117 million in private investment will be leveraged, bringing the total funds invested to \$1.31 billion.

By leveraging Recovery Act funding authorized by Congress, USDA has been able to provide loans and grants of \$2.65 billion to construct 231 broadband projects in 45 states and one territory. The remaining authorized funds will allow an additional \$1 billion in loans and grants by Sept. 30, 2010. The Recovery Act provided USDA with a total of \$2.5 billion to invest in expanding broadband access to rural America.

