

Regional, vendor neutral grid is coming together

By GENE STOWE
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Within the next month, the last links will be connected for a direct fiber backbone from Chicago to Elkhart with stops at communities along the way, thus creating one of the most significant vendor neutral communications backbones in the country.

The project dubbed "The South Shore Fiber Link" uses rights of way along the Norfolk Southern and South Shore railroad tracks to establish a regional backbone, with the service distributed wirelessly and underground from South Chicago to Elkhart County.

Developers say the infrastructure will immediately give many companies more choices and lower communications costs, and it lays a strong foundation for future economic development.

Bryan Baker, whose Control Inc. is working on the railway projects between Chicago and South Bend, and hence to Elkhart, says the last 1.5 miles near the South Bend Regional Airport will be completed within 30 days.

"These projects ensure that the fundamental infrastructure is there," he says. "Piece by piece a regional, vendor neutral grid is coming together."



The photo shows a tower located next to a railroad. This one is owned by the Norfolk Southern Railway and is situated along the railroad tracks east of Arnold between Huron and Hancock streets in South Bend.

Photo provided

digital information and compete on a global scale.

The project is primarily a result of the vision that the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (parent company to the South Shore Railroad) had when building a fiber network for their internal use. They knew they could have great impact on the communities they support by making space for them not just

on their railways but also on their "fiber-ways".

"In Elkhart County, there isn't affordable fiber like there is in St. Joseph County with the St. Joe Valley Metronet," says Gene Crusie, whose Commercial Broadband Solutions is providing wireless Elkhart distribution. "We're getting it to people who have no choice now."

Businesses are more geographically spread out in Elkhart County than in St. Joseph County, so wireless is a more efficient way to distribute than laying fiber, Crusie explains.

"We've built a licensed

microwave ring around Goshen," Crusie says, adding that some business customers have already signed up. "We're in the process of doing the city of Elkhart."

In a separate project, Gramtel is working with the Elkhart County government on hanging fiber to connect county offices with room for businesses. Crusie provides only data connectivity, a vendor-neutral system that allows companies to choose their own Internet service providers.

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