

Think tank focuses on broadband

By J.R. Logan

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Representatives of Kit Carson Electric Cooperative and the Taos County Chamber of Commerce met with members of the local business community Friday (July 6) to discuss how best to use the \$64 million broadband network that's being installed across the co-op's service area.

"One of the things we want to do is make sure that when we light up the system that everybody doesn't just look around and say, 'Now what,'" said co-op spokesman Steve Fuhlendorf. "We want to prepare the business community to take full advantage of this great economic resource." The federal government put \$7.2 billion in stimulus funds toward broadband access nationwide. The coop got a \$45 million grant and \$19 million loan to install fiber optic cable to every subscriber.

The co-op says it will make the Internet faster, accessible and affordable to anyone in Taos County by February 2015.

"This network is as powerful as any major network in any major metropolitan area in the country," said Dave Pangrac with Pulse Broadband, the contractor charged with building the system.

Pangrac said Pulse completed a similar broadband project in Missouri that drew a new factory to a rural part of the state. He also touted the advantages of online shopping.

But Chamber board president Brad Malone said his organization wants to emphasize the benefits to existing small businesses in Taos. "We're interested in growing from within, bringing our current infrastructure up, and giving the tools and the knowledge to the businesses that can then grow," Malone said.

The Chamber says it lacks the funding to create an "educational initiative" to explain how Taos' industries could use broadband.

Malone said the clock was ticking. "If we're not ready when this [broadband] hits our doors, then we've wasted 24 months," Malone said.

Some business owners pointed out that small businesses without a website will be "left in the dust."

Some at the forum said it's hard to imagine what businesses will be able to do when broadband arrives. "We just need to start opening our minds to what the possibilities are," Fuhlendorf said.

Bill Knief with University of New Mexico-Taos said broadband would allow the college to provide more online courses. The co-op has said its network will improve health care by allowing Holy Cross Hospital and local doctors offices to confer with experts in other parts of the country via the Internet.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 61.6 percent of New Mexicans had some access to the Internet in 2009 —the sixth lowest rate in the country. *The Taos News* has been unable to find reliable data on how many Taos County residents own or know how to use a computer and have access to the Internet.

Broadband could be the push many people need to get online, but it also means many residents will be faced with a big learning curve.

Celina Porter owns Yamina Day Spa in Taos, and has been a computer tutor in Taos. She told the group assembled Friday that she's seen a lot of people who don't know how to do something as basic as opening or saving a file. "There are so many people who don't even know how to use [Microsoft] Word or Excel, and we're expecting them to go online and buy stuff," Porter said.