

HardisonInk.com

Levy County LTPT may recommend endorsing CFEC efforts for better Internet service via fiberoptics



Some members of the Levy County Local Technology Planning Team (LTPT) are seen in the auditorium of the Levy County Government Complex on May 31. They are (from left) George Buckner III of Central Florida Electric Cooperative (CFEC) Mike West of the Levy County Sheriff's Office, Levy County Prevention Coalition Chief Operating Officer Jonathan Lewis, Nature Coast (Levy County) Business Development Council Executive Director Scott Osteen, CFEC General Manager Denny George and Levy County Superintendent of Schools Chris Cowart. Other NTPT members present then are Levy County LTPT Chairman John Meeks, Levy County Library System Coordinator Darlene Slattery and Levy County Parks and Recreation Director Matt Weldon.

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © June 2, 2022 at 8:12 p.m.

BRONSON – All 67 Florida counties are working on improving “broadband” or Internet service.

CFEC wants all of the counties to know if they have any open grants, or grants to partner for this type of service, they should contact CFEC to let the co-op become involved with it.

-- George Buckner III of Central Florida Electric Cooperative

HardisonInk.com



Ali Tretheway, county staff liaison to the Levy County LTPT, is seen moments before the start of the meeting Tuesday afternoon (May 31).



Levy County LTPT Chairman John Meeks, who is also a member of the four-person Levy County Board of County Commissioners, greets committee members and guests. Meeks clearly told CFEC that he believes the Levy County Commission wants to work with CFEC if it decides to go forward with a fiberoptic cable method.

HardisonInk.com



George Buckner III of CFEC tells listeners about the rural electric cooperative continuing to conduct research into providing fiberoptic connections for reliable, affordable, high-speed Internet connections in the Tri-County Area of Levy County, Dixie County and Gilchrist County.

There is hope for improved Internet service in the parts of Florida that are unserved or underserved. There is no plan in the Tri-County Area of Levy County, Gilchrist County and Dixie County for improvement in the immediate future.

Despite what looks like an insurmountable obstacle, the United States government has provided Florida with \$400 million to subsidize improvements.

With that, the Florida Legislature created the Florida Office of Broadband, in the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO).

Dane Eagle has been the secretary of the DEO since September 2020, according to records.

Katie Smith, Office of Community Partnerships & the Florida Office of Broadband, serves under Eagle.

Gov. Ron DeSantis signed HB 969 into law, establishing the Florida Office of Broadband, effective July 1, 2020, according to records.

The Florida Office of Broadband, within the DEO, was created for the purposes of developing, marketing, and promoting broadband Internet service in the state, according to records.

Florida Office of Broadband responsibilities are to

- Create a strategic plan to increase the use of broadband Internet services in the state.
- Build and facilitate local technology planning teams, especially with community members from the areas of education, healthcare, business, tourism, agriculture, economic development, and local government.

HardisonInk.com

- Encourage the use of broadband Internet service, especially in rural, unserved, and underserved areas of the state through grant programs.
- Participate in the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) proceedings that are related to the geographic availability and deployment of broadband Internet in Florida. As of this year, the Florida Office of Broadband is:
 - Establishing Local Technology Planning Teams in each county
 - Encouraging the use of federal funds allocated to Florida communities to be utilized for local broadband-related infrastructure projects.
 - Posting the GIS map of broadband internet availability and accessibility on the Office website.
 - Drafting the Florida Strategic Plan for Broadband.
 - Preparing for the 2022 Legislative Session

The Florida Legislature in 2021 amended the plans so that the Florida Strategic Plan for Broadband and the GIS map must be completed by June 30, 2022.

If that were to happen, it would mean the plan would be completed within this month.

That does not appear to be going to happen, according to what was said in Bronson on Tuesday afternoon (May 31).

A woman reportedly from the DEO Office of Broadband was “attending” the meeting on Tuesday (May 31) via telephone. Her name is Kiwanis Curry. As best as can be determined, before that position, she worked in the Florida House Ways and Means Committee (2020-2021) as a policy analyst.

Levy County Local Technology Planning Team (LTPT)

Many of the members of the Levy County Local Technology Planning Team met Tuesday afternoon (May 31) in the Levy County Government Center Auditorium, 310 School St., in Bronson.

This group is similar to the ad hoc committees in each of Florida’s 67 counties.

If the Levy County LTPT voted, it would be as a recommendation to the Levy County Board of County Commissioners. The Levy County LTPT is an advisory group only. It has not power to act.

They were formed per the mandate of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) for states and counties to qualify for federal funds to improve the Internet infrastructure in the United States of America.

This meeting heralded the third meeting of the Levy County LTPT. The next meeting date, time and place will be determined when it is needed.

The essential message from Tuesday is that Central Florida Electric Cooperative (CFEC) has installed fiberoptic cables to improve communication between its substations. This has led CFEC to increase its conversations about fiberoptic lines on poles to serve its customers.

LTPT Chairman John Meeks, who is also a member of the four-person Levy County Board of County Commissioners, said he believes Levy County will first work with whatever CFEC can do to help people in this regard in this county. Meeks does not foresee the county government becoming involved in providing Internet service.

As for the people present for the Levy County LTPT meeting of May 31, joining Meeks were Ali Tretheway, county staff liaison to the LTPT; Mike West, Levy County Sheriff’s

HardisonInk.com

Office E911 Coordinator; Levy County Library System Coordinator Darlene Slattery; Levy County Superintendent of Schools Chris Cowart; Levy County Tourist Development Council Executive Director Tisha Whitehurst; Levy County Prevention Coalition Chief Operating Officer Jonathan Lewis; Nature Coast (Levy County) Business Development Council Executive Director Scott Osteen; and Levy County Parks and Recreation Director Matt Weldon.

LTPT members who were absent Tuesday afternoon were Mike Johns, president of WiFiber; UF/IFAS Levy County Extension Agriculture Agent Mark Warren; Burke Brooks, of some local Chamber of Commerce; and Florida Department of Health Tri-County Unit Health Officer Natalie McKellips.

Also present in the meeting was Levy County Coordinator Wilbur Dean.

George Buckner III of CFEC and CFEC General Manager Denny George shared updates from the rural electric cooperative regarding its potential to add fiberoptic lines for Internet services for cooperative members and others.

As of Tuesday, Buckner and George said, CFEC has not committed to anything. It is continuing to conduct research, including visiting with other rural electric cooperatives, both smaller and larger than CFEC, that have instituted Internet services.

CFEC will either get into the broadband business or start supporting an entity that does provide that service, Buckner said, or after the June meeting of the CFEC Board of Trustees, the cooperative will decide whether to let the service happen without its participation, although if some other entity does accept the mission, CFEC wants to partner with them.

CFEC General Manager George said that the CFEC Board of Trustees are anticipated to decide to go forward or to not go forward with seeking to provide broadband Internet services to CFEC members during the June meeting.

CFEC General Manager George said he cannot give odds as to the likelihood of going forward or not.

Buckner said CFEC wants all of the counties to know if they have any open grants, or grants to partner for this type of service, they should contact CFEC to let the co-op become involved with it.

Whether CFEC becomes involved in the broadband infrastructure or not, the rural electric cooperative wants to be a partner to make it happen, Buckner said.

If CFEC went forward with placing fiberoptic lines on its poles, Buckner said, then all of the members of the cooperative definitely would have that service. Non-members potentially would have service if Duke Energy, the City of Williston and other electric service providers entered into agreements with CFEC for that.

This would be a huge undertaking, Buckner said, if the co-op moved forward.

The Levy County LTPT heard about survey updates. Superintendent of Schools Cowart said the school system's survey was not immediately available. The Levy County library system is providing its results on June 27.

This survey is to show Internet service levels in Levy County. Each county needs to provide this information to the DEO for it to continue with its planning.

To take the survey to help Florida know about the level of Internet service for your residence or business, click [HERE](#).

HardisonInk.com

Curry verbally shared some information about the Middle Mile Program. More information is available on the Internet.

The Middle Mile (MM) Program includes \$1 billion for high-speed Internet access. Funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the MM Program is a program to expand middle mile infrastructure, to reduce the cost of connecting unserved and underserved areas.

Middle mile infrastructure broadly refers to the mid-section of Internet infrastructure that carries substantial amounts of data at high speeds over long distances. This program will increase the resilience of Internet infrastructure.

Eligible entities include:

- Government: States, District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, other territories, Tribal government, local government
- Industry: Tech company, electric utility, utility cooperative, public utility district, telecom company/cooperative
- Non-profits and other associations: Non-profits, regional planning council, Native entity, or economic development authority
- Partnerships: A partnership of two or more entities described above – such as an electric utility and a local government entity.

Grants can be used for the construction, improvement, or acquisition of middle mile infrastructure, including:

- Construction, improvement, or acquisition of facilities and equipment
- Engineering design, permitting and work related to project reviews
- Personnel costs, incl. salaries and benefits for staff and consultants
- Other costs necessary to programmatic activities.

Grant applications are due before Sept. 30. The award start date is no earlier than March 1, 2023.

As for other cooperatives in Florida, at least one has moved forward completely, according to a story by Cindy Parks of Conexon Connect.

She noted Conexon Connect is Florida's first electric cooperative fiber-to-the-home project will deliver high-speed internet access to approximately 12,000 to 15,000 homes and businesses across four counties.

Conexon Connect was selected by Tri-County Electric Cooperative to deliver high-speed fiber internet access for rural Floridians living and working in the cooperative's service territory.

The cooperative is partnering with Connect to launch and deploy a nearly 2,400-mile fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) network, a project representing Florida's first FTTH project launched by an electric cooperative, Parks wrote.

This project will deliver world-class Internet service to approximately 12,000 to 15,000 homes and businesses across Jefferson, Madison, Taylor and Dixie counties, she noted.

Upon the project's completion, 100 percent of Tri-County Electric members will have access to the service.

Dixie County is served by CFEC, Tri-County Electric Cooperative and Duke Energy Florida.

As noted, the next meeting of the Levy County LTPT is to be determined. It is anticipated that meeting date, time and place will be provided to *HardisonInk.com*.