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Team Fishel Completes \$36M Fiber Telecom Network for Columbus

Laura Newpoff Business First

When Eric Smith decided 18 months ago to build a 70-mile duct system for high-speed Internet access around the city, the telecommunications industry wasn't ailing the way it is now.

And though a host of Internet service providers have gone belly up and startup telecom companies are saddled with debt, the president of Columbus-based Fishel Co. thinks there are enough healthy customers to make Columbus FiberNet a profitable venture within five years.

"When we started this, it wasn't half the risk that it is now," Smith said. "We still think demand for high-speed Internet connectivity is not going down and there are enough players in the industry who have money that we think that long-term, this is going to be a fine investment for us."

High-speed link

The \$36 million Columbus FiberNet was finished in February. It's an underground access ring that wraps around a good chunk of the city's outerbelt, linking the business parks of Dublin, Worthington, Westerville, Polaris, Gahanna, Easton and Hilliard with the downtown business district. And because of its circuitous nature, Fishel's information superhighway also offers redundancy, providing continuous service even if a line in the system is cut.

Fishel began the project in the fall of 2000 as a contractor for the project to Metromedia Fiber Network, a White Plains, N.Y.-based developer of digital infrastructure. When Metromedia backed away from the venture because of what Smith called "financial difficulties," Fishel took over.

The result is a route of ducts that will house high-speed fiber cables. The 20 ducts can be sold or leased on a long-term basis to businesses, Internet Service Providers, telecommunications providers and cable vendors to deliver high-speed bandwidth.

A company in downtown Columbus, for instance, could buy a portion of the network to establish a private link to a satellite office in the suburbs. Or an ISP could use the network to offer service to customers without having to invest in its own infrastructure.

"It's the biggest single conduit system ever built in the city of Columbus at one time," Smith said. "It's a good deal for the service providers because it's a low-cost, easy way to deploy their fiber in the city."

Qwest on board

The Fishel Co., a 65-year-old builder of delivery systems for telecommunications, cable TV, gas and electric utilities, built a conduit system called DubLink for high-speed data users in the city of Dublin in 1999. The new network connects to DubLink.

Qwest Communications International Inc.'s Dublin office has purchased eight of Columbus FiberNet's 20 ducts. The Denver-based company is an Internet, data, multimedia and voice services provider. Company officials could not be reached for comment.

Smith said Columbus FiberNet will allow Central Ohio to compete with larger cities like Chicago, Atlanta and Dallas that have made similar high-speed infrastructure investments.

"We wanted to make it attractive enough so that carriers like Qwest, Sprint, Broadwing or anybody who is providing high-speed Internet and fiber connectivity would look at Columbus and say, 'Hey, we don't even have to build anything, it's there,'" Smith said.

Economic edge

Columbus FiberNet will be an important competitive development tool, said Mike Brown, a spokesman for Columbus Mayor Michael Coleman.

"If we keep doing efforts like this and are aggressive with it, we can potentially be one of the most connected cities in the nation," Brown said. "Our ongoing economic development efforts try to attract jobs, businesses, entrepreneurs and small companies to come here and grow.

"To be able to say that you have the technology infrastructure is a huge bonus," Brown said.

The new network is more cost-effective than high-speed access from other suppliers, said J. Pari Sabety, director, technology policy at the Ohio Supercomputer Center in Columbus.

"You pay your T1 (Internet access) charges to Ameritech once a month whether you use it or not," Sabety said. "The (Columbus FiberNet) provides you so much bandwidth and once you buy it, you put in the routers and everything else - say you sink \$10,000 into it the first time - guess what? You never pay a number again. It's rent vs. buy."

The system costs \$12 a foot along the outerbelt and \$25 a foot in downtown Columbus.

Beyond cost, Sabety said, Columbus FiberNet is a boon to a city that's tried for years to establish itself as a "tech town." Columbus is the only city in Ohio to have this kind of infrastructure, she said.

"It's a huge advantage for us," she said. "We can make this place a hub of experimentation in high-bandwidth applications."

Columbus FiberNet "represents a major step forward in the region's efforts to develop broadband capacity and connectivity," said Todd Ritterbusch, president of the Columbus Technology Leadership Council.

"It's particularly exciting," he said, "because it has been developed by a well-established, profitable local company with a strong commitment to the community."

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