

WESTERN REGION

Speeding up

The tiny town of Burnsville and surrounding Yancey County are home to an unlikely distinction: the fastest countywide Internet speed in North Carolina. That means even the most mountainous reaches get the kind of service that customers have in the state's urban centers. It's the result of a five-year project that started during the heart of the recession. Newly elected county officials in 2008 placed broadband on their priority list, and the issue happened to coincide with available federal stimulus money. Big telecommunication companies balked at partnering with the county, but home-grown Country Cablevision decided to take on the project. In all, expanding infrastructure cost \$25.2 million — about \$18.6 million from stimulus funds and \$6.6 million from a U.S. Department of Agriculture loan. So far, about 2,000 homes and businesses are wired to the fiber system out of about 24,000 that have access to it, including parts of neighboring Mitchell County, says Dean Russell, project manager for Country Cablevision. Customers have trickled in as they cancel contracts with providers such as Dish, Frontier Wireless or AT&T. Yancey County has about 17,600 residents, according to census estimates. While pricing for



Cable, phone and Internet service originate at Country Cablevision's control site in Yancey County.

speeds of 25, 50 and 100 megabits per second are roughly comparable to other providers, its gigabit service costs about \$500 per month. AT&T charges \$70 per month for gigabit service in its North Carolina markets.

Ray Vance Miller, founder of Country Cablevision, has built and sold cable systems across the country, including cities such as Tampa, Fla., and Myrtle Beach, S.C. The Yancey County operation started in 1988. "He's always had cable systems going and decided to build one where he grew up," Russell says. Miller, 83, has also personally contributed an unspecified amount to efforts to improve connectivity. Country Cablevision has partnered with the county to open a tech center that provides speeds

of 1 gigabit. "Say you're an engineer. You could go to the tech center and upload or download schematics instantly. Now we're looking to develop a proper co-working space," says County Planner Jamie McMahan.

The project has changed the way Yancey County can recruit businesses. Large companies such as Birmingham, Ala.-based Altec, which employs about 500 in the county, can communicate more easily with other plants. "They went from having the worst Internet connection — they couldn't Skype or video connect to the other 40 plants — but now they have the fastest," McMahan says. Sitting 35 miles north of Asheville, the county is hoping the connectivity will help recruit young entrepreneurs.


ASHEVILLE — AvL Technologies will invest \$7.6 million and add 90 jobs to its 160 in an expansion of its local headquarters. Based here since 1994, the company designs and makes mobile satellite antennas. The new jobs will pay an average annual wage of \$40,000, about the same as Buncombe's \$39,178.

ASHEVILLE — Duke Energy will retire its coal-fired power plant here within

five years and replace it with a \$750 million, natural-gas plant. The Charlotte-based utility also will build a \$320 million substation near Campobello, S.C., to support the new plant.

FLETCHER — AdvantageWest will suspend operations by year-end as a result of the state's 2013 decision to eliminate funding for the seven regional economic-development partnerships. The organization,

which serves 23 western counties, is working with other regional groups to continue its programs and initiatives, including ScaleUp WNC, a networking and consulting program for startups that is backed by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

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