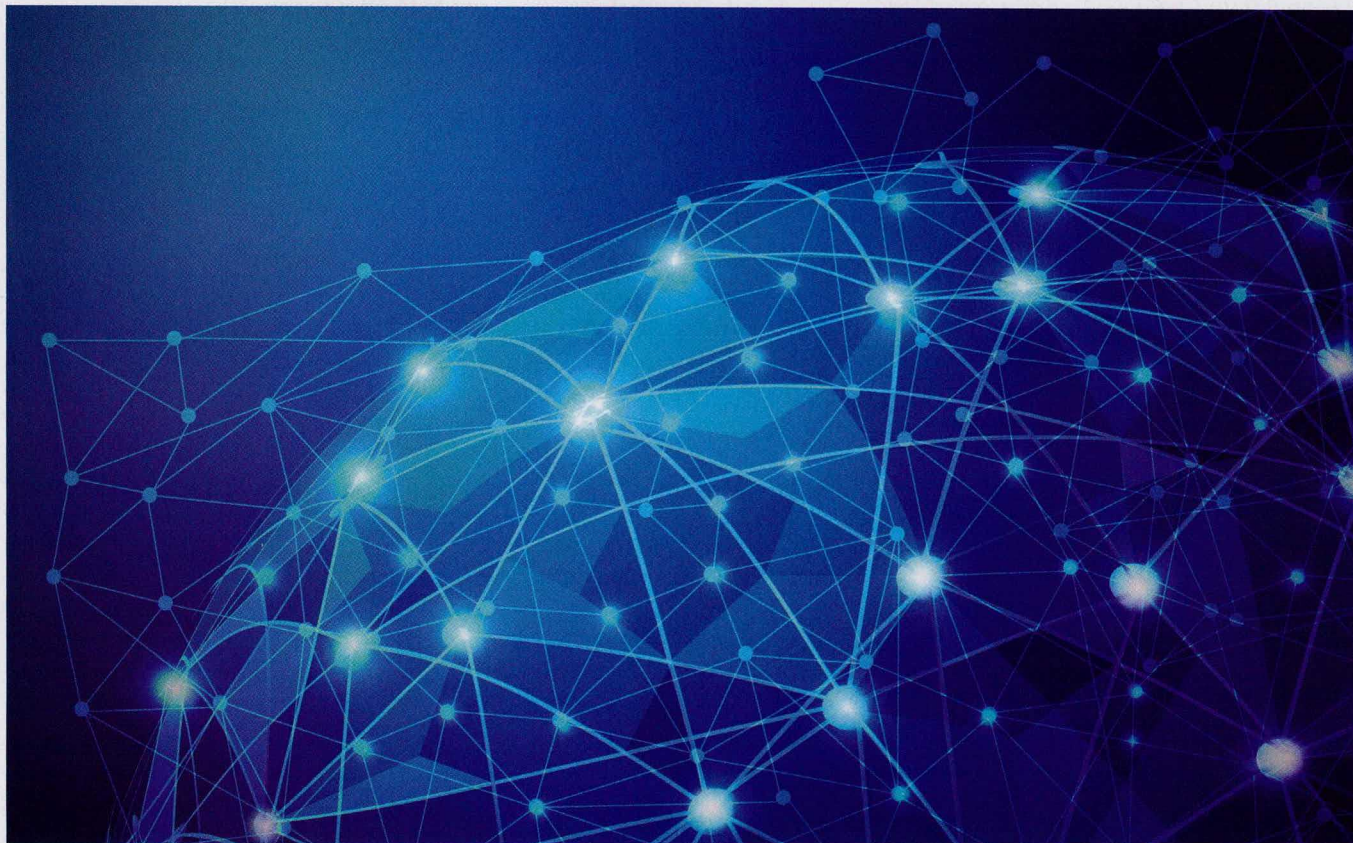


## TELECOMMUNICATIONS



# Within reach

*Telecommunication companies lay a path for economic development.*

**N**ot long ago, companies looking for a place to relocate to focused on gas, electricity, water and sewer. Today, another piece of infrastructure is equally as important — often topping the list. “Having high-speed Internet access is required for economic development,” says Ron Walters, executive director of Tryon-based PANGAEA Internet, a nonprofit service provider in Polk and Rutherford counties. “Having the right infrastructure in place fuels job retention and job growth, and creating more jobs really is the gold mine of economic development.”

The North Carolina Chamber’s economic-development plan, *North Carolina Vision 2030*, calls for “the best technology possible to connect with the world.”

Benefits include financial savings, increased productivity, better education and more options for health-care and emergency services. The plan highlights the nonprofit Microelectronics Center of North Carolina’s Golden LEAF Rural Broadband Initiative, which provides affordable broadband to public- and private-school students, patients in rural hospitals, and researchers at universities and other institutions. Hickory-based CommScope Inc. has participated in the project from the beginning. “Increasing bandwidth to rural and underserved communities will provide subscribers with the ability to compete and learn on a global scale,” says Ric Johnsen, senior vice president of broadband. “It is difficult to think about ... education, health care or research that does not involve communication across a wide area.” It’s also impor-

tant to note that it is an open-access network. "Open access is the key," says MCNC spokesman Noah Garrett. "MCNC will provide fiber infrastructure to any service provider, enterprise business or public agency that can leverage the infrastructure to grow jobs."

There are numerous other examples of telecom advancements in the state, Garrett says. North Carolina Research and Education Network, operated by MCNC, provides broadband communications to K-12 school districts, the UNC System and 58 community colleges. The North Carolina Next Generation Network, a group of six cities and four research universities, encourages the private sector to provide affordable bandwidth to its region. Time Warner Cable Inc.'s \$600 million acquisition of DukeNet Communications Inc. in January added more than 8,700 miles to the New York-based telecommunications company's fiber-optic network in North Carolina. In February, Mountain View, Calif.-based Google Inc. announced it had invited 34 cities — including Carrboro, Charlotte, Chapel Hill, Durham, Garner, Morrisville and Raleigh — to apply for Google Fiber. Typical broadband networks average around 20 megabits per second; Google Fiber boasts 1,000 megabits, or 1 gigabit. "Who wouldn't want 1-gigabit-per-second service?" asks Kent Brown, director of business development for Duncan, S.C.-based AFL Telecommunications LLC. "Competition is the best driver, [and] this competition for the 1-[gigabit] customer will be a game-changer over the next couple of years."

Dennis Bloss, North Carolina vice president and general manager for Stamford, Conn.-based Frontier Communications Corp., says consumers are increasingly realizing the full power of the Internet — streaming video, online banking and educational courses, social networking, and making dinner and travel reservations. "Not long ago, we just used the Internet to check our email and surf the net; today, broadband is integrated in the daily lives of our customers."

This explosion of data transfer requires more bandwidth. Frontier is responding by upgrading telecommunications operations where feasible.

PANGAEA hopes to enhance quality of life and business recruitment in Polk and Rutherford counties by connecting public schools, charter schools, Isothermal Community College in Spindale, local and county governments, hospitals, medical offices and about 70 commercial customers. Though business centers and established neighborhoods have strong Internet service, Walters says rural areas are suffering. PANGAEA is addressing this by supplying high-speed Internet to broadband providers. These companies then offer broadband to residents of rural areas via antennas on mountaintops. It also partnered with Menlo Park, Calif.-based Facebook Inc., Rutherford County Schools and Forest City to launch a pilot program with the goal of delivering free wireless service to students. The Going GLOBAL project provides every middle

and high school student with a laptop to use at school and home. The problem is that thousands of students don't have connectivity at home. PANGAEA and Facebook, which runs an 800,000-square-foot data center in Forest City, will help them receive free Wi-Fi.

Royster Tucker III, CEO of High Point-based North State Communications LLC, says such programs are essential. "A mechanism must be in place to drive these rural broadband connections in schools in a nondiscriminatory matter," he says. "North Carolina is blessed with some very strong telecommunications providers in rural areas, which can provide adequate broadband connections." Frontier's Bloss agrees that better access to information will position North Carolina students for success. "By ensuring we deliver the education and develop the talent that companies need, we will incent companies to start, locate or expand in North Carolina, driving future economic growth and jobs." ■

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