Libraries eye stimulus money for their Web access

May 5 2009, By ANDREW VANACORE , AP Business Writer

(AP) -- The libraries in Delaware County, Pa., are trying to shift into warp speed. The county is hooking eight branches to a fiber-optic network to help meet library patrons' ever-rising demand for high-bandwidth tasks like streaming educational videos and uploading online resumes.

Yet that still leaves 17 of the county's branches in the digital slow lane.

Jacking just the eight libraries into fiber lines is costing about $200,000 this year, a big chunk of the roughly $3 million budget that David Belanger, the county's director of public libraries, has to work with. So the other branches have to wait.

Belanger's situation is fairly typical, according to the American Library Association. That's where $7.2 billion in federal stimulus money for expanding broadband comes in - or so many libraries hope.

The library association is trying to convince the federal agencies in charge of doling out stimulus grants that libraries are the best way to extend high-speed service to the most people.

The group released a survey Tuesday in which nearly 60 percent of libraries said their Internet connections couldn't meet bandwidth demands at peak hours. At the same time, 70 percent said they are the only source of free Internet access in their communities.

"If the government's goal is to make sure everyone has access to broadband, the most fiscally responsible way to do that is attaching fiber to the libraries," said Emily Sheketoff, who heads the American Library Association's office in Washington. "By investing under $1 billion, you could hook up every public library in the country to high speed."

Whether that happens is, in part, up to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, which is working on criteria for judging grant applications under the stimulus package. NTIA spokesman Mark Tolbert said the agency could not comment on the specifics of the application process before the criteria are released this summer.

In a prepared statement, he said, "The ALA's opinion is very important and is part of the extensive input we've received from the public on how best to implement the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program."

Libraries are nevertheless competing with other constituencies for the stimulus spending. Aside from telecommunications companies looking to expand their networks, advocates for the poor say getting more high-speed access to people's homes should be a priority.

"We have a national opportunity to put poor people first when it comes to broadband," said Rey Ramsey, chairman of the nonprofit group One Economy Corp. "The best way to do that is to provide an avenue that mirrors what middle-income and upper-income people have, and that's home access."

Ramsey pointed out that public facilities like libraries already get federal help. The stimulus bill itself designates $200 million for grants to libraries, community colleges and other public venues.

And the federal E-rate program, which has been operating for years, provides schools and libraries with money for high-speed Internet

infrastructure.

Library advocates argue that they deserve stimulus funding because they provide crucial services to a large number of people, especially in less-affluent areas where fewer individuals can afford high-speed Internet. More people are going online to apply for jobs and access government services - a trend accelerated by the recession, the advocates say.

As a result, the ALA's Sheketoff is urging the government to favor broadband-grant applications that "guarantee broad community accessibility."

"Libraries are really anchor institutions in many communities," said John Bertot, a professor in the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland and the lead researcher in the ALA's survey.

"Libraries are continuing to expand online services by making broadband and wireless available," he said. "But they are running into some constraints."

Among the barriers are high costs and the need for technical expertise to run faster networks, he said.

And even with fiber networks, more work may be needed to ensure fast enough speeds as library traffic grows.

All 34 libraries in the Pacific Library Partnership in the San Francisco Bay area have fiber connections, but the network is "getting slower now because everyone is using it," said Linda Crowe, the partnership's executive director. "If you build it they will come."

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