City advancing plans for broadband

By Drew Setterholm Daily Press Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, October 23, 2014 2:00 am

Broadband implementation in Montrose and the surrounding area will not come without its challenges – but local leaders have made gigabit connectivity a priority and are eager to move forward.

City of Montrose staff and Mayor Bob Nicholson, on Sunday and Monday, attended the launch of Next Century Cities in Santa Monica, Calif. The newly formed organization brought together 31 inaugural cities, counties and municipal government organizations to discuss broadband implementation and how local governments can be involved.

Virgil Turner, city director of innovation and citizen engagement, and City Manager Bill Bell attended the conference with Nicholson. Among their takeaways from the informational and experience-sharing session were the necessity of broadband service for economic development and if, and how, government can assist in implementation.

Turner said the focus covered "the whole gamut, starting with understanding if there's a need for a municipal or a county government to get involved with broadband, clear through to what cities that have been doing it for a while are seeing as results of emphasis on municipal involvement in broadband."

Montrose is currently participating in a regional fiber optic broadband implementation study facilitated by the Region 10 League for Economic Assistance and Planning, a six-county economic development organization.

Region 10 has commissioned private contractor NEO Fiber to conduct community analyses and engineering studies. Community meetings with each major area in Region 10 were completed last week, Region 10 Executive Director Michelle Haynes said. A developed plan for services and network creation should be complete in six to eight months.

Region 10 took on the project because of the wide-ranging benefits of accessible broadband implementation, Haynes explained.

"We feel that it really impacts every aspect of what we touch," Haynes said. "It's getting to the level that electricity was back in the 1900s. There was an understanding that it's what you need to operate and be competitive."

Haynes added community leaders in Region 10 had identified a lack of broadband connectivity as the number one barrier to economic development in the area.

The City of Montrose has been an active participant in Region 10's development plans, Turner said, and, after meeting with other municipal leaders at the Next Century Cities launch, staff was reassured

the city is on the right path to establishing service – and that waiting for private industry to construct a viable network without public assistance was likely not an option.

"It really reinforced to us that we are on the right track, that this is extremely important for our future and if we are to expect someone else to take care of this for us, we will probably be expecting that for a long time – it's not going to happen," Turner said.

Cities that have been on the forefront of establishing public broadband access, or public-private partnerships to build a network, have seen significant increases in economic development, increased tourism and vibrancy in their communities, Turner said.

As plans develop in the region, Turner indicated each community would need to craft its own approach to broadband implementation with the support of region-wide partners. Potential hurdles are the high cost of building a network, which involves laying subsurface fiber optics throughout the city, and planning for service with private providers.

The city will continue to explore its options in upcoming council work sessions and through staff research.

"What we're trying to figure out is how it would be paid for, what level of municipal participation would be needed, and certainly how the network – once it's installed – how it would be operated," Turner said.

After seeing the benefits of broadband development in other cities, Montrose leaders are eager to advance plans locally.

"The thing that I sort of picked up is that, in many ways, broadband is kind of a highway to our future and will act as a highway for us and for business, as well as for residential customers," Nicholson said. "It's a relatively low-cost thing that brings us into the future and is probably necessary for our community to thrive and to be viable. I think we're all interested in promoting that and moving forward."

Haynes said Montrose is one of the region's leading communities in the field, both due to its government interest and the citizenship's approval of a ballot measure to allow local government to become involved in technology services.

The city will continue its exploration of providing gigabit service, and likely with a sense of urgency, Bell added.

"One of the main things that I learned was that the very successful cities in the area of broadband don't do it incrementally – they go all in and they get it done. That seems to be the best for the constituents and the citizens and the attraction of business," Bell said.

A report from the recent conference will be posted on the city's website, www.cityofmontrose.org,

and regular updates are being posted to Region 10's website, www.region10.net/broadband.