

Regional Backbone Initiative Network opens across Southside

IN SEPTEMBER, a unique public-private partnership celebrated the completion of a 700-mile, open-access telecommunications infrastructure across Southside Virginia. Designed to provide open-access high-speed optical transport services at affordable rates, the new fiber optic cable route spans 20 counties, five cities and more than 60 business and industrial parks.

Known as the Regional Backbone Initiative, the three-year project is a collaboration of the Virginia Tobacco Indemnification and Community Revitalization Commission (VTICRC), the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA), and the Mid-Atlantic Broadband Cooperative (MBC), a Richmond-based not-for-profit cooperative organization. MBC retained the consulting firm of Dewberry to provide planning, permitting, design, and construction management services for the project.

The partnership sought to promote economic development by attracting technology-based businesses. "It was clear that communities in Southside Virginia needed to offer more than the standard water and sewer infrastructure in their business and industrial parks," said Darren Conner, PE, senior vice president with Dewberry. "Broadband communications capability has become a vital component in today's infrastructure

package. Virginia's new regional network will serve as a national model for economic development, especially in rural areas."

The VTICRC and the EDA funded the \$37 million initiative, which is projected to create more than 1,500 new jobs and \$140 million in new investments. "Without the tobacco commission, it would have been decades before our rural communities could provide similar telecommuni-

ture is complete, municipalities and the private sector have the opportunity to construct "last mile" fiber routes to tap into the network. Dewberry has recently begun design of the "last mile" route for the town of Halifax, with Community Development Block Grant funding.

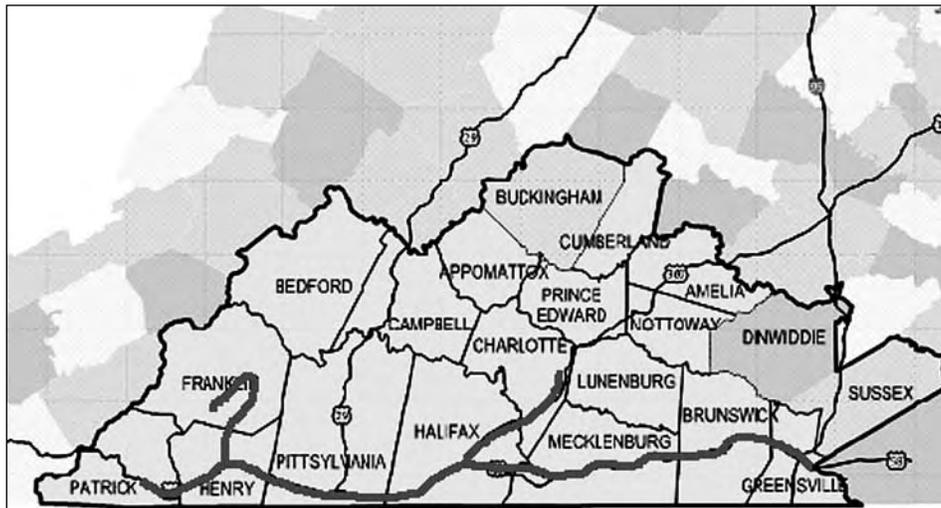
"A major component of the tobacco commission's charge is the revitalization of those communities that were tobacco-dependent for so many

years," said Neal Noyes, executive director of the VTICRC. "This broadband initiative helps to level the playing field for rural Virginia. It's completely integrated to points of international departure. We're already seeing these communities attracting major new businesses, and we're just getting underway."

"Those of us who were born

and raised in this area want to make sure the next generation has the same opportunities that we've had," Senator Hawkins said. "We want to continue to provide jobs close to home."

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cations access," said Virginia Sen. Charles R. Hawkins, who chairs the VTICRC. "This is a bold initiative that ties many communities together."

The 144-strand cable runs along Route 58 and portions of Routes 220, 360 and 460, connecting industrial parks, community colleges, the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research, and other organizations throughout the 700-mile route. Dewberry relied upon maps generated by the Virginia Base Mapping Project (VBMP), a resource for statewide imagery completed in 2003, to design the cable route. Using the VBMP data saved approximately \$300,000.

Now that the backbone infrastruc-