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Business

Agile Networks, Microsoft working to bring broadband to more rural Ohioans

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Microsoft and Agile Networks have announced a new agreement to extend broadband access over the next four years to 110,000 unserved people in rural Ohio. The agreement is “great news for Ohio,” said Stu Johnson, executive director of Connect Ohio, a nonprofit group that works to expand broadband connections. “Agile does terrific work for the public-safety network.” Canton-based Agile Networks has long been a player in bringing broadband coverage to rural areas.

A new effort is underway to bring the internet to thousands of people in rural Ohio who lack access.

Microsoft and Agile Networks announced a new agreement to extend broadband access over the next four years to 110,000 unserved people in rural Ohio.

The agreement helps to address a longstanding need in rural Ohio, where more than 900,000 people lack access to reliable broadband. This lack of availability keeps them from tapping into digital tools that are available in agriculture, education and other areas.

The partners say the project will also support public-safety functions, including medical clinics and rural hospitals, which increasingly need reliable high-speed connectivity.

The project is part of the Microsoft Airband Initiative and will use a mix of technologies. These include TV white spaces — unused broadcast frequencies between TV channels — as well as Agile’s telecommunications infrastructure of hybrid fiber wireless broadband data networks throughout Ohio.

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Canton-based Agile Networks has long been a player in bringing broadband coverage to rural areas.

Six years ago, Agile announced plans to roll out a statewide wireless broadband network that would cover 100,000 unserved households. At least part of that network was in partnership with T-Mobile.

The agreement with Microsoft is “another arrow in the quiver to address the problem,” said Kyle Quillen, Agile Networks founder and CEO. “There’s not one solution for everything.”

“People across the state, no matter where they choose to live, work and send their children to school, should have the same access to strong, reliable broadband service. This partnership will have an impact on more than 900,000 people across the state of Ohio, of whom 110,000 completely lack access to broadband.”

The planned use of TV white space is an important aspect of the plan, Johnson said. “It travels farther, penetrates better, it’ll go through your house, through trees — so it’s great for rural areas.”

Until recently, the technology hadn’t been available to allow users to get higher download speeds via TV white space.

But Quillen said that has changed.

“We’ve done extensive research on this and we’re seeing phenomenal throughput speeds on white space,” Quillen said. “I myself was a naysayer a few years ago, but the technological advances make it a completely viable option.

“We want to focus in on areas where there are problems getting broadband. I would implore county officials in southeastern Ohio to reach out to us and talk about where their needs and problems are. We want to leverage this to the maximum. We’re already getting a lot of people saying they need help.”

Today’s digital economy makes broadband “a necessity across industries, including health care, agriculture, business and education,” said Shelley McKinley, Microsoft’s head of Technology and Corporate Responsibility. “Our partnership with Agile will help deliver broadband internet access to rural communities across Ohio so that they can take advantage of today’s and tomorrow’s opportunities and the latest cloud technologies.”

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