

Government Revisiting Fiber-To-The-Home in Orange Beach

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Rauf Bolden, Orange Beach

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Here we go again, resurrecting the same old plan when so many new options are on the table.

"Once we get the marketing materials together and get the name out there in the area we are going to start marketing ourselves as a fiber to the home provider [in Orange Beach]," said WhiteSky's Matt Amick in a report on the obawebsite (<https://obawebsite.com/oba-news/2019/whitesky-latest-to-explore-orange-beach-fiber-options>). "Within the next month or two we're really going to start working on it."

This prepaid enrollment plan failed before, and it will fail again. "An effort last year through CenturyLink fell through mainly because of a lack of consumer confidence," said Councilman Jerry Johnson in a report on the obawebsite (<https://obawebsite.com/oba-news/2019/whitesky-latest-to-explore-orange-beach-fiber-options>). I guess consumers will have more confidence in a company they never heard of before today.

The premier fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) city in Alabama is Sylacauga, "The Utilities Board of the City of Sylacauga is the sole provider. We are a gigabit city and we offer service within our electric service area and a few areas outside of same. We bring the service to customers on demand. We did not run fiber to every brick and mortar hoping for a subscription," said Reay Culp, Network Administrator for the Utilities Board of the City of Sylacauga in an email (<http://altoday.com/archives/26906-rauf-bolden-fiber-optic-internet-to-the-home-in-orange-beach>).

The Sylacauga model is exemplary because their municipality is heavily invested, believing in the idea. Orange Beach Mayor Tony Kennon should take a posse north, putting boots on the ground, seeing why Sylacauga is the shining light, perhaps returning with elements from their playbook before rolling out another doomed proposal.

Doing more onsite research, traveling to see what works in other fiber communities like Bristol, Va.; Dalton, Ga.; Chelan County, Wash.; Grant County, Wash.; Jackson, Tenn.; Kutztown, Pa.; and Reedsburg, Wis. will help focus the lens. Orange Beach must do a better job the second time around instead of trotting out the same old prepaid subscription chestnut as before. Senator Mitch McConnell (R-Ky) says there is no education in the second kick of the mule.

Why do we have this problem?

Quite simply said, the world is changing. Internet access and generous bandwidth are as indispensable to local families as air. Today's economy cannot function without both. Getting Internet is the easy part, having enough bandwidth to support families with children, operating multiple devices, and businesses with an online presence are where fiber connectivity comes in.

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Orange Beach needs young families to move here, supporting our economy. High bandwidth homes will give the city the potential to market itself to professionals who do not need to report to their offices every day, possibly moving their families to Orange Beach, raising their children in a safe environment, attending our schools, worshipping in our churches, and participating in local government. A fiber infrastructure will attract a class of resident that is technologically savvy, having more years in front of them than they have behind them. Building out the network with city funds ensures the future survival of this vibrant community. That's what's important here, investing for familial continuity.

Do we really have to connect every home in Orange Beach with fiber in order to achieve high-bandwidth connectivity?

The answer is no, because the city owns several strands of dark fiber, supplied by Harbor Communications. Harbor has fiber traversing every arterial road in the city, and they already supply all city facilities with Internet service and VoIP phones. When coupled with a Verizon partnership, perhaps a fiber operator is best suited, helping Orange Beach create the first 5G city in Alabama.

"5G is reaching speeds that are twenty times faster than 4G LTE," according to a report on the Droid Guy (<https://thedroidguy.com/2019/01/how-fast-is-5g-vs-4g-1084299>).

Alternatively, residents needing immediate increases in bandwidth can purchase a small Internet device (JetPack) from a Verizon store. This 3"x5"x1" box offers a choice of several "4G LTE [no unlimited]" plans (<https://www.rvmobileinternet.com/verizon-overhauls-prepaid-introducing-unlimited-data-plans-for-jetpacks/>), allowing simultaneous connections on several devices.

So you see, high-speed Internet in terms of bandwidth already exists in Orange Beach through a wireless carrier. It is just a matter of deciding if you want to go wired with fiber or wireless without.

I do not make this statement lightly. Verizon powers the city's cell phones, Police mobile, and Fire mobile. These "JetPack" devices have proven to be very reliable for our first responders, and department heads. Communications between essential personnel in the City of Orange Beach cannot be down, per Mayor Kennon.

Outlining 4G availability options to our constituents as a realistic alternative to wired connections will help cut Internet provider complaints to city hall, perhaps gaining traction for a city financed upgrade to the next generation of 5G wireless service.

5G requires a build out, combining buried fiber optic cables and electrical power, interconnecting the poles along the rights-of-way into an integrated infrastructure network. The build will look something like this. Each pole is set approximately one-quarter of a mile apart along Canal Road, Hwy 161, and the Beach Road. I know this is possible with fiber already in the ground, because I have the fiber maps, but I cannot share them here, because they are proprietary.

Attached to these poles is a 5G antenna, being cylindrical in shape about the size of an electrical transformer you see on generic power poles. I argue the city should finance the build out of a 5G network, guided by technology from Verizon's engineers, creating a telecommunications model that will carry Orange Beach into the 22nd century, bringing high speed Internet to every family and business that wants it.

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"The initial cities that will support Verizon 5G home broadband are: Indianapolis, Indiana; Los Angeles, California; Sacramento, California; and Houston, Texas," according to a report on 9to5Mac (<https://9to5mac.com/2018/09/11/verizon-5g-home-broadband/>).

Being first in the market has its drawbacks. "Verizon has been in a cutthroat competition with AT&T to be the first carrier to offer 5G, and it already claimed that title — sort of. The telecom giant launched a pre-standard 5G network in the fall of 2018, deciding to move forward with its own technology rather than wait for slow-moving standards bodies to ratify a 'final' specification," according to a report on Digital Trends (<https://www.digitaltrends.com/mobile/verizon-5g-rollout/>).

Granted the Verizon "JetPack" service only provides Internet. It is not a bundled TV, data and phone product. Once online you can choose between several entertainment providers like Sling, Hulu, Netflix, Apple, and Amazon for news, sports, and drama. The era of the home phone is over, just accept it and go mobile, making calls, sending texts, and emails wirelessly.

The biggest hiccup in going wireless is the bandwidth cap. Perhaps embracing a public-private partnership with Verizon will allow the city to leverage an "unlimited plan" for residents. I don't see why not. They provide unlimited for governments.

Why would local officials paint a picture of needed technology when they don't have to?

Residents need better service than they are presently receiving. That part is obvious, but presenting only one solution is disingenuous. Informing our constituents of the Internet alternatives will start the debate in our community, providing myriad choices for consumers.

ENDS.

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