

Local telephone company receives stimulus for upgrades

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The Northeast Louisiana Telephone Co. has received \$12.4 million from the federal stimulus package to improve broadband access in rural Morehouse Parish. The Collinston-based company will replace its current copper network with buried fiber optic cable that will give its customers access to high-speed Internet, digital TV service and expanded telephone service.

The funds, awarded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture following a grant application by the company last summer, include a \$4,359,000 grant and a \$8,124,600 low-interest loan. The company must complete the project within three years under the terms of the grant.

"We were very surprised," said Mike George, the company's chief financial officer.

"It's one of those things where you set yourself up to think you're not going to get it."

The company is waiting to receive more specifics on the funds before they develop a time line for the project.

George said the company will complete the project "as fast as possible."

U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., said in a prepared statement that the funds will help make Morehouse Parish more competitive.

"The Recovery Act Broadband Infrastructure projects bring small businesses in rural parts of the country one step closer to being true competitors in the global economy," Landrieu said.

"With the help of these funds, the Northeast Louisiana Telephone Co. will be able to expand its coverage to more rural areas of Louisiana. The funding will also provide an economic boost to an area that has been recovering since the closure of International Paper last year."

Last month, Landrieu secured \$194,800 in omnibus appropriations funding for Ruston's Technology Infrastructure Improvements Program.

Northeast Louisiana Telephone Co., founded in 1947, serves customers in Collinston, Bonita and Jones.

George said the company has 15 employees, 800 telephone customers, 175 DSL customers and 250 to 300 cable TV customers.
