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Regents Support Broadband Consortium

BROOKINGS, S.D. – To connect South Dakota to a high-speed broadband telecommunications network, the South Dakota Board of Regents will consider funding for the project in its budget request to Gov. Mike Rounds and the 2007 Legislature.

"High-speed broadband is critical to connect South Dakota's researchers to the national grid of research networks," Regents President Harvey C. Jewett said. "In today's world, our researchers must be able to quickly download enormous amounts of data, in order to access and share these data sets with other researchers or government agencies."

Regents were briefed Friday on plans for South Dakota to partner with North Dakota, Montana, and Idaho in the Northern Tier Networking Consortium. Wyoming is also a possible future partner. Depending on options chosen and how many sites are connected, the project's price tag is anywhere from $5.3 million to $8.8 million in one-time charges, and about $900,000 up to $1.5 million for annual ongoing expenses.

South Dakota needs access to a high-speed network in order to bring together university researchers, research laboratories such as the Homestake deep underground lab project, and federal research centers. "As the Homestake lab comes on line, researchers will expect South Dakota to have the infrastructure in place to support their efforts," Jewett said. "This is a project of the highest priority to ensure the success of Homestake and other research efforts," he said.

For example, scientists at South Dakota State University are involved in a national program, AmericaView, which makes use of satellite remote sensing data for applied research, education, workforce development, and technology transfer. The entire state of South Dakota is remotely imaged every eight days, and it takes 15 images to cover the state. At current network speeds, it takes more than an hour to transfer these images. But with a very high bandwidth network, the transfer would take less than a minute.

The national broadband network that currently crisscrosses the nation completely bypasses the Upper Midwest region. The closest hubs to access the network are located at Chicago, Kansas City, and Denver.

A $200,000 National Science Foundation grant funded planning for the Northern Tier Network, and the consortium is pursuing other federal grants to help cover some of the project's costs.

However, Jewett acknowledged that state and federal appropriations would likely be necessary to cover the network's total cost.

"The bottom line is this: high-speed broadband connections are so important to research and economic development that this project must proceed, or South Dakota will be left off the national networking map," Jewett said.

The consortium has proposed two main routes following vendor fiber-optic paths that would connect South Dakota to the national network. A north-south route would extend from the North Dakota border south to Aberdeen, Brookings, Sioux Falls, Sioux City, and on to Kansas City. The east-west route is planned from Sioux City through Vermillion, Rapid City, and Spearfish, and on into Wyoming.

Regents were told that having these multiple points where South Dakota can connect to the national backbone network would increase the network's availability and flexibility, and help control long-term costs.

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