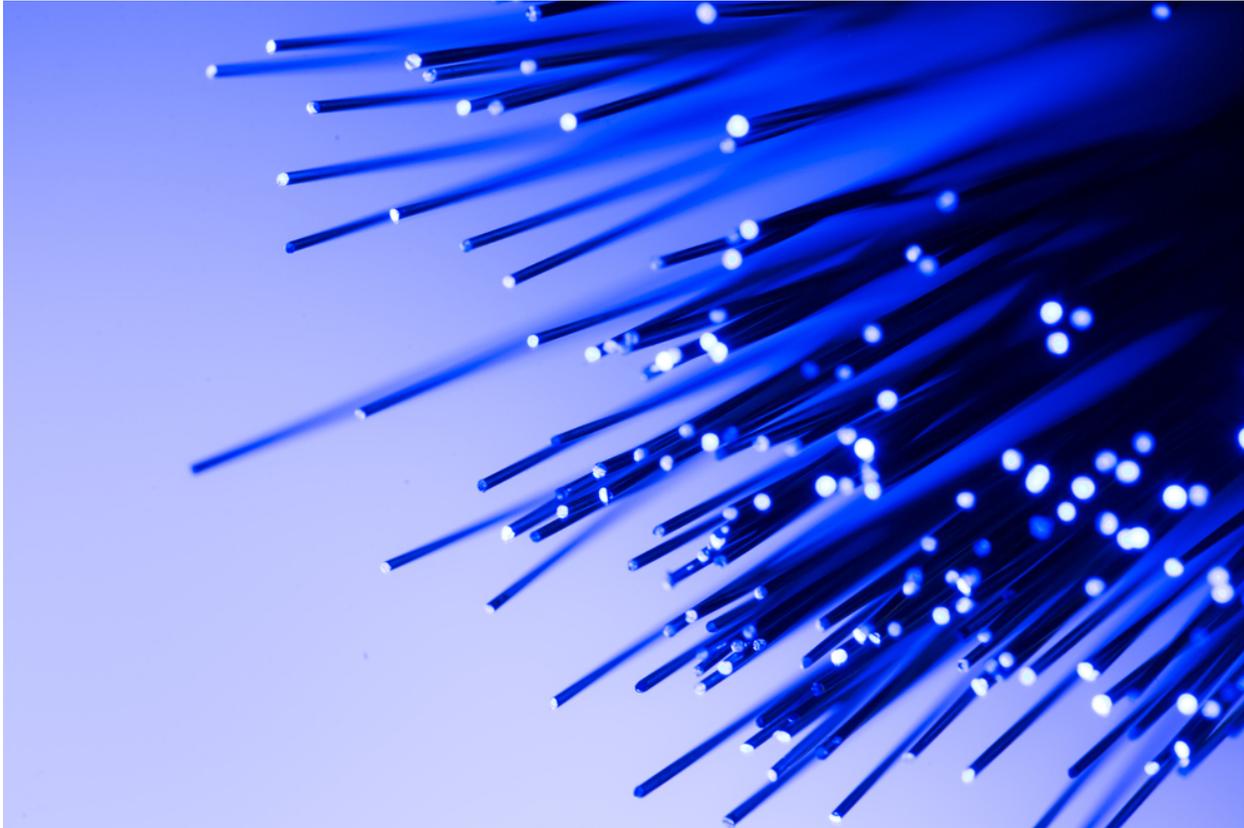


Desperate for Broadband, King George County, Va., Supervisors Waive Company's Fees

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(TNS) — Because there aren't any other providers "beating down the door" to bring high-speed Internet service to the rural county, the King George County, Va., Board of Supervisors is willing to help a local company.

After some discussion about what kind of precedent they would be setting, board members voted unanimously Tuesday night to waive fees and expedite the processing of permits — as much as possible — for KGI Communications Inc. Its owners, Steve and Michele Wido, are looking to bring "air fiber," the fastest form of broadband technology, to the rural area via radio signals transmitted from towers.

County officials estimated the waived fees would total several thousand dollars and the needed permits would involve 24 to 30 hours of staff time. Even though giving away services is "counter-intuitive," County Administrator Neiman Young encouraged board members to do just that "because there's no other Internet companies beating down the door" to set up shop.

"This project is so important to King George County ... that I highly advise the board waiving these fees," Young said.

Members agreed, even though there had been discussions about what kind of “slippery slope,” as Supervisor Cathy Binder put it, the county would be going down if it started waiving fees for businesses.

“It would absolutely set a precedent,” said Brad Hudson, director of community development. He added that several companies had asked “for waivers for a whole host of fees” but hadn’t gotten them.

Supervisor Ruby Brabo wondered how many other companies were providing “a critically needed service that a community cannot live without.” When Hudson said that was hard to answer — because some developers believe affordable housing falls in that same category — Supervisor Jeff Bueche chimed in that KGI Communications’ purpose differs from others.

“This ain’t another tire shop,” he said.

Supervisor John Jenkins Jr. added that the county keeps studying broadband’s importance, especially in terms of economic development. “But if we’re not going to do anything about it, what’s the point?”

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The company already has a tower in the southern part of King George that’s operational with a radio signal of 5.8 gigahertz. It’s super fast, preferred by gamers and requires a clean line of sight. For the two months it has been operational, the signal has allowed the Widos to offer service to 14 customers.

Brabo met one of their clients recently and said the woman was “tickled pink” to get more bandwidth for half the cost she’d been paying.

The Widos are still waiting for approval from the Federal Communications Commission to get the latest and best frequency, which is 3.65 gigahertz. This signal doesn’t require a direct line of sight and will reach customers in all the dales and valleys that make county coverage so tough, Steve Wido said.

The couple assumed they’d register for the second signal and be done with it, but have since learned the process to get FCC approval can take four to six weeks. “We’re in our sixth week,” Michele Wido said.

The company has 200 people on a waiting list and has been paying rent on towers and fiber optic lines while having only 14 customers to offset those costs.

That’s why the Widos sought county assistance.

While the Board of Supervisors was agreeable, the Board of Directors on the county’s Service Authority was not. Supervisors Brabo, Binder and Richard Granger serve on that board, along with residents Christopher Werle and Mike Bennett.

The Widos asked the Service Authority board to waive the rental fee of the Arnold’s Corner water tower for 18 months. County officials previously had met with the Widos and agreed to a rental fee of \$1,000 per month for a year.

“What happened with that?” Werle asked.

Steve Wido explained he didn’t realize the government approval would lag for so long.

“Giving you rent free because you didn’t do your due diligence doesn’t seem prudent,” Binder said.

Werle asked if the Widos sought a discounted deal with the other two towers. Steve Wido said the contracts already had been negotiated and were good for five years.

Werle didn’t like the idea of setting a precedent of free leases. He wondered if the Widos could defer payment until they had a revenue flow or if they could apply for a grant from the county’s Economic Development Authority to cover some costs.

Other board members liked that idea and encouraged county officials to meet with the Widos as quickly as possible about coming up with another plan on the water-tower lease.

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