

## With Funding in Place, Florida City Begins Planning Fiber-Optic Expansion

June 4, 2018

(TNS) — BARTOW, Fla. — Bartow is poised to move ahead with a pilot project that potentially could bring fiber-optic services, including internet, to residential neighborhoods.

Currently, the city's fiber-optics service is limited to governmental buildings and those businesses that are close enough to them to piggyback on the system.

The city wants to expand that, said City Manager George Long, but only in the shallow water to start.

"We want to start with a pilot project so we can learn what we can about this process before we make a huge investment," he said.

He said it's likely that system could be under construction by the end of the year. This year's budget includes \$2.5 million for it, he said, so the funding already is in place.

The pilot project is expected to include about 1,000 combined households and businesses in the city, which totals about 19,000 residents. At Monday night's meeting, city commissioners are expected to define the geographic area for the expansion.

Lakeland's commission had discussed a similar proposal earlier this year, but pulled back for fear that incumbent commercial providers could sink the educational value of a pilot by offering aggressive deals to residents in the area.

Long said the expansion will bring smart metering to the city's electric department, enabling customers to monitor and manage their electric service using their smart phones. It also will allow for meters to be read remotely, he said, which will increase efficiency and accuracy.

From the customer's perspective, the system will allow more flexibility in paying for utility services.

Years ago, Long said, the city's customer service representatives juggled payment arrangements for those who needed extensions on their bills.

"We eliminated that deal making, partly as a matter of basic fairness," he said, "but also because it was hard to manage. This program will include the ability to pay for utilities in incremental portions."

For example, a resident would be able to purchase a week's worth of power at a time, in advance, rather than have to pay a month's bill at once.

"There are people who need to be able to do that," he said, "and this will give them that flexibility."

Optional technology could afford residents the opportunity to continually analyze their power usage, and possibly consider where they could reduce it.

"We're still evaluating all the equipment that will be available," Long said.

Commissioner James F. Clements said he supports the pilot project.

"It's going to put Bartow on the map, especially with economic development," he said. "It will help us attract companies that need that level of Internet service.

"This investment that we're going to make is going to upgrade and expand what we already have, and we're going to be able to offer more for somebody looking to build a call center or a manufacturing plant requiring high-speed Internet to that capacity. I think it's great."

Long said the next step calls for the city to solicit the fiber-optics equipment and electrical equipment, and to design the plans for the pilot system.

"We're taking this one step at a time," he said.

To take the fiber-optics program citywide is expected to cost as much as \$25 million, Long said, and there are no plans at this time to take that step.

"Once we get the pilot project running, we'll take time to evaluate it before we move on."

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