

NIU will put zip into the Net

I-88 fiber optics: NIU's new online network to accelerate research, business

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NAPERVILLE — Apparently, there's no speed limit on the information superhighway.

Though high-speed dial up, DSL and broadband have raced to make the Internet faster and faster in recent years, Northern Illinois University officials have devised a plan to transfer huge loads of data in mere seconds to communities throughout Northern Illinois.

For example, full-length movies take more than six hours to download on broadband Internet. NIU officials say they know how to do it in 30 seconds.

A new ultra-high-speed Internet network will connect west suburban cities, schools, hospitals and research facilities within the next three years, NIU officials announced Wednesday.

"NIUNet," a 175-mile fiber optic loop that will run underneath Interstates 88 and 90, will provide Internet communication between the local partners much faster than existing networks, officials said.

While Chicago and several other major cities already have similar high-speed networks in place, NIUNet is the first of its kind in the suburban area.

"This can open a whole new world of teaching and learning," said NIU President John Peters.

Officials plan to run two pairs of fiber optic cables around the main NIU campus in DeKalb, and in satellite campuses in Batavia, Naperville, Hoffman Estates, Belvidere, Rockford and Rochelle. One set will be strictly non-commercial and non-residential and used for research purposes at schools, hospitals and other educational centers. Another set will be used by the Illinois Municipal Broadband Communications Association and will eventually provide service for private parties.

The network will not only help advance research at NIU, but also fulfill the "mission of public universities: to help the economic development of the region," Peters said.

NIUNet will boost the number of high-tech jobs and companies coming to local towns, he said. Employees will have more opportunities to telecommute and consumers will have access to business in other areas.

The network will also benefit doctors and patients, added NIU professor David Gunkel. Although major urban hospitals have quick access to the latest medical information, regional and rural hospitals can't afford the same expertise. But with NIUNet, data can be quickly sent to regional hospitals, Gunkel said.

The network was originally planned to connect NIU campuses in Hoffman Estates, Naperville, DeKalb and Rockford. But because of cost concerns, officials discovered that the "loop" around the four campuses included potential partners who could also benefit from the connection.

They partnered with the Illinois Municipal Broadband Communications Association, Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia and local municipalities to create the project.

"What none of us could do by ourselves, all of us could do together," Peters said. "And that is to create a fiber-optic loop."

The project, which will cost an estimated total of \$6 million, will only cost NIU \$1.5 million, said Wally Czerniak, head of NIU's information technology. None of these costs will require student contributions.

The first phase of the project has already begun, as links from NIU's DeKalb campus to its Naperville campus and Fermilab in Batavia are under way. Officials are still working on installing cable under parts of the roads, leasing the existing cable under the tollway, and creating access points from each city to the tollway.

Once the project is completed, individual cities will oversee and maintain their portion of the fiber-optic loop, officials said.