

WEST METRO

Carver County expands internet access to rural areas

An initiative to build out its fiber optic network is expected to be completed in December 2024.

By **Katelyn Vue** (<https://www.startribune.com/katelyn-vue/9363959/>) Star Tribune |

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When students in Tom Marcsisak's fifth- and sixth-grade classes need to use the internet for schoolwork, they have to take turns logging on so the connection doesn't get too slow.

The nearest fiber optic cable is 2 miles from Zion Lutheran School in Cologne, a rural area of Carver County where many lack reliable internet access. County officials are aiming to get more than 2,000 homes and local businesses — and the school — online through Connect Up Carver, a \$10.5 million project that will expand fiber connectivity mainly in the western part of the county.

"We've been hoping that we would be able to get a fiber optic," Marcsisak said. "We are very much looking forward to having this and hoping that it will definitely increase our download speed and our upload speed and all the things that go with it."

The county is using \$6.5 million in federal pandemic aid to pay for Connect Up Carver, and internet provider Metronet is investing another \$4 million. The County Board signed off on the project in June, and it's expected to be completed in December 2024. Construction began Sept. 20.

"This partnership spans the gap between public and private and urban and rural," Rep. Dean Phillips, a Democrat who represents Minnesota's Third Congressional District, said in a statement. "Connected communities thrive, and these investments will yield immense returns."

Carver County Board Vice Chair John Fahey said it's common knowledge that some of the county's townships don't have reliable internet. Growing up in Norwood Young America, Fahey said, "We've always had reliable internet. ... But I have friends that live out in the townships, and their internet is just not reliable."



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A crew including Jason Haugen lays down fiber optic cable as part of "Connect Up Carver"



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Randy Lehs heads up the "Connect Up Carver" initiative which is bringing broadband internet to rural areas in Carver County.

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Before the COVID-19 pandemic, CarverLink Fiber Manager Randy Lehs said, calls about slow internet connections came from people with complaints such as having to wait a long time for a Netflix show to load. That quickly changed when fast internet became a necessity for children to go to school or workers to log into the office remotely, he said.

Carver County began developing its fiber network in 2013, and it has grown from about 130 miles to roughly 600 miles. Connect Up Carver will add 350 miles to the network, an expansion that Lehs compared to building driveways off the "main road" that is the existing network.

Residents and businesses must opt in to participate.

"We're absolutely not in the game to be a service provider such as a Comcast or Verizon or somebody like that," Lehs said. "But we do believe we have a role from a county perspective to help bring out vital and needed infrastructure, which the pandemic absolutely helped identify."

If Connect Up Carver is successful, nearly all Carver County residents will have access to fiber internet once the project is complete.

"It's a phenomenal vision, and, honestly, for communities like this that are more rural in nature to continue to compete and have economic development initiatives come to their communities, a utility like this — high-speed broadband — is absolutely critical," said Rose Mulvany Henry, Metronet's vice president of regulatory affairs.

Katelyn Vue is an intern working on the metro team. She is a recent graduate from the University of Minnesota with a double-major in journalism and political science.

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