

Pinehill Connected

Fiber optic internet to reach 600 homes in Pinehill

By Vida Volkert

Staff writer vvolkert@gallupindependent.com

PINEHILL – Sprinkling corn pollen over a pile of dirt at the Ramah-Navajo fairgrounds and Rodeo Friday, the medicine man blessed the start of a new fiber optic internet project to connect 600 homes in Pinehill.

The blessing was followed by the symbolic shoveling of dirt by local Ramah-Navajo authorities and supporters, including Navajo Nation Vice President Richelle Montoya and Navajo Nation Broadband Office director Sonia Nez.

Cibola County Commissioner Martha Garcia, who is also the president of the Ramah-Navajo School Board, was also in attendance – shovel in hand.

“This is a new project,” Garcia said, noting that this was the second groundbreaking ceremony she attended this year for fiber optic internet project in the Pinehill area.

Back in March, the community celebrated the groundbreaking for a project to connect 80 homes in the Pinehill area, where about 15-20 homes couldn’t connect at all. The first fiber optic project was funded by the Emergency Connectivity Fund in the amount of about \$6.4 million.

“This one is a lot bigger,” Garcia said. “We are not connecting 600 homes with fiber optic.”

High speed internet access

Fiber-optic internet, commonly called fiber internet or simply fiber, is a broadband connection that can reach speeds of up to 940 Megabits per second, a tremendous achievement for this rural community about 60 miles south of Gallup.

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A Pinehill family accesses the internet from a home in this undated photo. A recent upgrade allows broadband connections that can reach speeds of up to 940 Megabits per second.

Courtesy Photo.

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Before the community started using fiber optic technology, the internet connectivity was done through satellite and it was very slow and unavailable in wooded areas flanked by hills, according to Margaret Merrill, co-owner of Oso Internet Solutions. Merrill, who worked as a teacher for the Pinehill Schools for several decades, made it her mission to bring fiber optic to the community.

“I came as student teacher in 1979. The first time I drove into this place I knew I was home,” she told the Independent. “I worked for the schools for 30 years. I started a nonprofit and utilized that to do financial literacy. Through that process I realized that trying to operate anything through satellite internet was very difficult.” Unlike fiber, a satellite dish needs good weather to function well, and any storms, extreme temperatures or wet weather can cause disruption in the satellite’s communications.

Fiber optic technology uses fiber-optic cable, which can send data as fast as about 70% the speed of light. In addition, internet experts claim fiber-optic cables are not as susceptible to severe weather conditions as other types of traditional cables, which helps minimize outages. It also resists electrical interference effectively.

Merrill said she worked with the community on the project to bring high speed internet.

Key issue for emergency response

Darnell J. Maria, the executive director of the Ramah-Navajo Office of Grants and Contracts, said earlier this year that the internet connectivity and good reception is key for law enforcement and emergency personnel to respond to any incidents.

Maria said the service would also allow community members to work from home, take college classes online, research business related opportunities, and reliable internet will help with economic development in the area.

“It took a group effort and strong community support to make it happen,” Merrill said. “Oso



Internet will continue to expand our fiber and wireless internet service, so that every Ramah Navajo family, in this beautiful, remote community, has excellent broadband access.”

A group of officials gathers for a groundbreaking to install fiber optic for 600 homes at pine fairgrounds Friday.

Courtesy Photo.

The new project to connect 600 homes is being funded with American Rescue Plan Act funds. Since the homes are already in an area where the infrastructure is already in place it will be less challenging. The cost is about \$5.8 million. Merrill said the funds were awarded to the Navajo Nation to utilize for broadband connectivity.



Cibola County Commissioner Martha Garcia, who is also the president of the Ramah-Navajo School Board, speaks at a groundbreaking ceremony in March.

Vida Volkert/The Independent