

Game Changer

Eastex to provide future-proof fiber to Northern Polk County

Story by JEN CALHOUN

Polk County Judge Sydney Murphy laughs when she remembers the day commissioners partnered with Eastex Telephone Cooperative to build a state-of-the-art fiber internet network in the northern part of the county.

For the previous 60 days, the county had been under a burn ban due to drought. In a twist of fate, the Eastex partnership announcement came about the same time the ban was lifted. “So, I’m over here doing the happy dance and patting everybody on the back for changing the trajectory of our lives, our children’s lives, economic development and job opportuni-

ties,” Murphy says. “But most people were just happy they could burn their brush.”

Murphy likes to joke about the memory, but she’s dead serious when it comes to the need for reliable internet. “The driving impetus for this partnership was that the north end of Polk still had black holes in terms of internet service, and even cell service,” she says. “To give you one example, our school districts up there had trouble communicating with their own school buses.”

CHARGING UP NORTHERN POLK

The Eastex partnership will change all

that. The \$10 million contract will bring reliable, gig-speed fiber internet service to an area of the county that’s gone without it for too long. While Eastex already serves most residents of Southern Polk County, the cooperative will soon serve about 1,300 more locations.

“We believe that this partnership and future-proof broadband infrastructure will not only improve the lives of residents of northern Polk County but will also increase the economic development in the region, advance the delivery of government services, education, health care, public safety and smart agriculture

practices,” says Eastex General Manager Rusty Dorman.

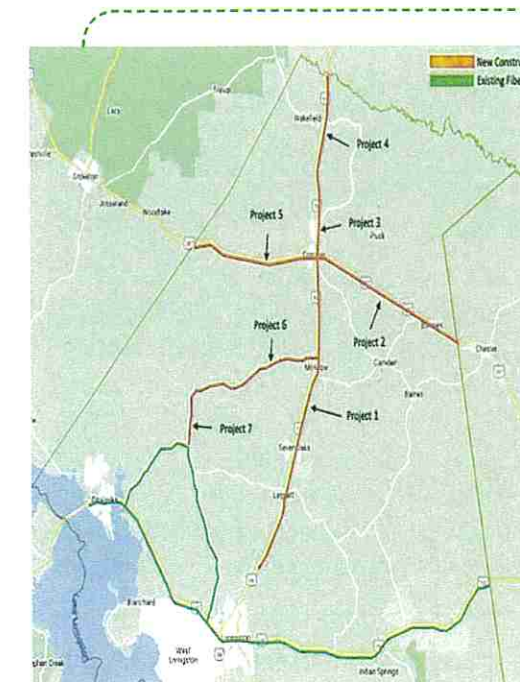
Eastex is already well into extensive planning and engineering, and fiber-to-the-premises connections could be ready as soon as the early part of 2024. What’s more, Eastex trucks and work crews are rolling. Locations include the areas along Highway 59 between the Polk County line and Livingston, Highway 287 between the Polk County borders, and FM 350 North between Highway 59 and FM 3152.

MISSING LINKS

For several years, a national, for-profit telecommunications corporation supplied some internet service to the northern part of the county, but they often cherry picked where they put it.

“They wouldn’t go in and provide internet service across the board,” Murphy says. “They claimed they did, but just because you have a wire slung down by the side of the road doesn’t mean you’re serving people that live along that road. But sure, they’d come in and lay wires and provide service to the state of Texas, just not to the residents of the state of Texas.”

The problems peaked during the COVID-



Keeping East Texas connected

Eastex’s northern Polk County project is part of a larger, ongoing fiber construction plan that includes dozens of fiber projects across the cooperative’s 2,314 miles of service territory.

19 pandemic when people couldn’t get online for school or work. “All of a sudden, we’ve got an entire school district with children who had no access to do remote learning,” Murphy says.

A dispute between the for-profit corporation and one of its contractors caused even more problems, says Jessica Hutchins, Polk County’s grant and contract coordinator. At one point, the dispute resulted in a government office losing its internet service — through no fault of the county.

That hasn’t been the case with Eastex. “It’s been a pleasure to work with them,” Hutchins says. “They’ve gone above and beyond to meet the county’s needs. Anytime we’ve ever needed anything, they’ve been on it. Nothing’s ever a hassle with them.”

Murphy agrees. “We’ve had great experiences on every level with Eastex,” she says. “There are the local representatives, who have a vested interest in their communities, but people on the regional level have also listened to us, acknowledged what the needs were and agreed to stretch a little bit.”

With Eastex signing on to provide service, the northern end of the county can grow and improve. “It’s a very rural area, but Houston is heading our way,” Murphy says. “We want to make sure we’re strategic about our growth and where it goes. We don’t want to lose our green space, but at the same time we want to increase the tax base and provide a better quality of life to the people who live here.”



Members of the Polk County Commissioners Court and Eastex Telephone staff celebrate their fiber internet partnership. From left to right: Anthony Hendrix, Guylene Robertson, Wes Robinson, C.T. “Tommy” Overstreet, Rusty Dorman, Judge Sydney Murphy, Ronnie Vincent and Milt Purvis.



Jessica Hutchins is the Polk County grant and contract coordinator.



Polk County Judge Sydney Murphy

