



Whitman port lands \$9.8 million grant: Federal stimulus money will be used to strengthen rural telecommunications

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Mar. 3--Almost \$10 million in federal stimulus money is bound for the Port of [Whitman County](#) to strengthen rural telecommunications.

The \$9.8 million the Port of Whitman County is receiving is part of an \$84 million award the Northwest Open Access Network will use to improve access to and affordability of telecommunications at libraries and medical centers throughout the less populated parts of Washington, including Asotin County.

NoaNet is a not-for-profit organization formed by public utility districts in [Washington](#) that has constructed significant infrastructure that delivers services like high-speed Internet to small towns.

The project is expected to employ hundreds throughout Washington in the next three years, but officials at the Port of Whitman County and NoaNet didn't know Tuesday how many would be in Whitman County.

The issue in Whitman County involves small towns outside Pullman, such as Colton and Colfax, where the population density is so thin private companies can't justify the investment, said Debbie Snell, properties and development manager at the Port of Whitman County.

Services such as video conferencing are available, but the price is too high for most users, Snell said. The hope is the government-subsidized network will make the cost for users similar to those in Seattle.

The libraries in Colton, Colfax, Albion, Oaksdale, Rosalia, St. John and Tekoa are among those that will be connected to the new network, along with a medical clinic in Tekoa, Snell said.

Other groups in Whitman County will also benefit, but it's too early in the project to identify them, Snell said. The original grant proposal was for \$96 million and those at NoaNet are working through which pieces were approved.

The towns where the fiber-optic lines and other computer equipment are placed will see dramatic changes, said Nena Walton, a spokeswoman for NoaNet in Wenatchee.

A clinic in Lake Chelan, for instance, where similar infrastructure is already in place can send medical tests to doctors in Boston and get replies within a matter of minutes instead of one hour, Walton said.

The information assists Lake Chelan doctors in making critical decisions about whether to open the heads of accident victims to relieve pressure or not, Walton said.

"They'll do that one little piece that will save their life and then they life-flight out to Harborview," Walton said.

First Step Internet also applied for \$3 million in federal stimulus money to improve Internet access in north central Idaho. The Moscow business may hear if it was awarded the money later this week.

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