

# Staying connected to technology good for community

Ah, fiber-optic cable. It's the stuff dreams are made of.

In my dream, the cables are mysterious things that snake underground and bring me fast connections to my favorite websites. To others, however, fiber-optic cables may be less dreamy and more about the reality of what's needed in a community's infrastructure for it to grow.

The greater Tri-Cities has done a good job of expanding its information technology infrastructure to retain and attract businesses. But it hasn't been easy.

This area's champions — including the Tri-City Development Council, technology companies like Lockheed Martin Information Technology and Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, and the cities and counties — continue to make the case for additional infrastructure.

Benton PUD's recent installation of fiber-optic cable between Richland and Prosser is an example of this perseverance.

"Benton PUD partnered with PNNL to construct the line primarily

to provide an interconnection between the PNNL campus in north Richland and a regional and national fiber network that includes a segment from Boise to Seattle," said Rick Dunn, director of engineering at Benton PUD. "The additional fiber-optic cable means we are positioned to begin offering broadband services in Benton City, as well as expand our existing ones in Prosser."

Dunn added, "We will also use the fibers to improve Benton PUD's electric system and business operations. Like other businesses, our need for fast broadband data transport is increasing every year. This new cable will expand our broadband footprint and open up new possibilities for near-term and future benefits to the district and

users of our broadband network."

To put it simply, broadband is a fast connection to information services such as voice, video and data. The connection also enables us to send and receive large amounts of information quickly, securely and conveniently. And fiber-optic cable is considered the fastest, most reliable broadband medium.

PNNL's need for the new fiber-optic line is to improve the reliability of its connections in Seattle and Boise to regional and national research and education networks.

These networks are built, in part, on fiber-optics operated by Level3 Communications, which also operates one of the largest internet protocol transit networks in North America. With the new Benton PUD fiber-optic cable now intersecting the Level3 Communications network, we've provided additional options for companies in the Tri-Cities that need large amounts of bandwidth.

And for companies considering moving to this area, the added bandwidth could be an incentive.

Furthermore, Benton PUD's fiber network is connected to NoaNet, a statewide high-speed network. "Benton PUD is a founding member of NoaNet, which provides service throughout the Pacific Northwest with special emphasis on rural communities. NoaNet, in turn, is connected to the international internet backbone at hubs in Seattle and Portland," Dunn explained.

Meanwhile, the city of Richland and Port of Benton are collaborating to extend the city's fiber-optic cable infrastructure into the Tri-Cities Research District.

This connectivity is good for our community, particularly in areas focused on technology-based economic development.

"The Tri-Cities Research District always welcomes infrastructure enhancements that will help attract new tech-based businesses," said Diannah Howard, executive director of the TCRD. "More than ever before, business owners, their customers — and the general population — demand real-time sharing of informa-

tion. Broadband connectivity is essential to satisfying this demand."

In this area, businesses use broadband to conduct day-to-day operations such as payroll and billing. The connections also are used to store medical information, share diagnostic images and collaborate among health care providers. And in the education realm, high-speed internet connections enable distance learning opportunities and enhance educational experiences.

Jerry Johnson, PNNL's chief information officer, once gave me a good analogy comparing dial-up (old school) versus broadband connections. He said it was like moving from a two-way street to a 40-lane highway.

Great. Now I can dream about 40 lanes of fast snakes. I mean fiber-optic cable. Thank goodness for it, though, because it's helping grow this area.

► *Andrea Turner works with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory's Economic Development Office. She can be reached at 509-375-3893.*



**Andrea Turner**

Economic  
Diversity