

OPALCO Broadband Study

Facts and FAQs

Situation:

OPALCO is taking a significant role in a community project to bring reliable, full-service, high-speed broadband to San Juan County. We are committed to study only at this point.

Background:

In 1999, OPALCO decided to take control of our own internal communication system and SCADA (supervisory control and data acquisition) links due to lack of data capacity and reliability with CenturyTel. While we still use CenturyLink for phone service, we use our own fiber for phone switching—which gives a comprehensive phone system integrating voicemail, our outage management system (OMS) and future integrated voice response (IVR) capabilities as well as video and data connections to service our administrative, field communication and electrical power system needs.

In January of 2001, the OPALCO Board approved the “OPALCO Plus” fiber system build out plan; in July of 2003, the Board approved the Island Network Friday Harbor Intranet Pilot and in March of 2004 the first Island Network subscribers joined OPALCO’s fiber network.

Since 2004, OPALCO has increasingly used our fiber network to provide reliable high speed broadband access to county infrastructure organizations such as WA State DOT Ferries, schools, libraries, county administrative offices, fire stations, medical centers, internet service providers (ISPs) and now the new San Juan Island hospital.

San Juan County is behind the curve in making reliable, high-speed broadband available as a basic infrastructure to its citizens and businesses. OPALCO is now seriously examining ways to employ available capacity on our fiber network to serve our members’ broadband needs in a way that makes economic and environmental sense.

OPALCO is working closely with EDC and the San Juan Island Community Foundation in a county-wide Broadband Initiative workgroup toward the common goal of an expanded broadband network that would provide reliable, high-speed broadband services to most (estimating 90%) of San Juan County.

Existing Infrastructure – see map attached

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. What is “broadband?”

Broadband is high-speed internet access.

2. What prompted OPALCO to participate in the broadband study?

Because of our existing telecommunications network, OPALCO was asked to participate in the county-wide effort along with the San Juan County Economic Development Council and San Juan Island Community Foundation.

3. In what ways would broadband expansion benefit our members?

Expansion of our broadband infrastructure would improve our public safety network and advance the menu of telecommunication services available county-wide. Public safety improvements include better dispatch and two-way radio communications, enhanced 911 services and communication between first responders and hospitals. The expanded menu of services would include reliable, higher-speed internet with increased opportunities for telecommuting and small business applications, mobile data acquisition and streaming video.

4. How does this project relate to OPALCO's mission?

OPALCO has continually evolved to meet the needs of its members. Our mission is to "serve our members with safe, reliable, cost-effective and environmentally sensitive electric utility services." In addition, our values statement guides us in carrying out our mission and charges us to "seek and implement innovative solutions."

5. Aren't we already getting broadband services?

Yes – most of San Juan County has access to some level of broadband services. The expansion project seeks to provide higher-speed, more reliable service on a county-wide basis.

6. Is OPALCO proposing to become an Internet Service Provider (ISP)?

Not at this time. OPALCO is studying how important broadband expansion is to our members, what it would cost to make our existing fiber network available for broadband expansion, and how to most effectively deliver services to our members. Who would deliver those services is yet to be determined.

7. How will this effort improve our cellular phone services?

Unfortunately, improved cell service depends on existing cell providers (e.g. AT&T, Verizon) making their own investments in the county. If opportunities arise to work with existing cell providers to improve cell coverage and service, OPALCO hopes to do so. Expanded broadband will improve access to wireless communication services via the internet including Skype (web phone), mobile data acquisition and email.

8. What is this effort going to cost us? Will our rates go up?

We have yet to determine how much broadband services would cost or how to fund the broadband expansion effort. OPALCO has hired consultants to do a feasibility study of the market and economic considerations. Members will have an opportunity to review and comment on the business plan, if the study proves that broadband expansion is feasible for OPALCO.

9. When will the results of the study be available?

OPALCO's broadband study will be complete at the end of November, with results available for member review before the end of the year.

10. When would greater broadband services be available?

It's too soon to tell, but OPALCO's infrastructure improvements could begin as early as 2012.

11. Who do I call if I have more questions or concerns?

Contact Suzanne Olson at 376-3537 or solson@opalco.com.

ORCAS POWER & LIGHT COOPERATIVE
FIBER OPTIC COVERAGE
San Juan County, Washington

EXISTING FIBER
PLANNED FIBER BUILD-OUT

- POP LOCATIONS**
- (P1) LOPEZ POP
 - (P2) SAN JUAN POP
 - (P3) SHAW POP
 - (P4) EASTSOUND POP
 - (P5) BELLINGHAM POP
 - (P6) FIDALGO POP
 - (P7) MT. CONSTITUTION

