

IT'S ELECTRIFYING!



MOVING CLOSER TO BROADBAND EXPANSION

OPALCO's Broadband Expansion Project moved a few steps closer to reality this January when OPALCO released the results of an engineering feasibility study commissioned in late 2011. The study was conducted by a telecommunications consulting firm, and the results are encouraging. Islanders need faster, more reliable internet connections, and the study suggests it can be done here—despite the islands' challenging topography. The OPALCO Board has not made a decision to go forward, but has approved more targeted studies to further explore the project.

The 2011 study proposes a solution that would extend OPALCO's high-speed network to the general public by building out the fiber optic lines to a set of wireless end points, which would then provide high-speed data communications to homes and businesses. This expanded network would help OPALCO modernize its monitoring and control of the islands' electric grid, provide "smart grid" features in support of energy conservation efforts—and the same "hybrid" fiber/wireless network could provide high-speed internet access to most of San Juan County. The project cost is estimated at approximately \$18 Million, which OPALCO would finance using low-cost loans through the USDA's Rural Utilities Service.

These wireless facilities could also meet other critical needs for our community through joint use agreements with other organizations. OPALCO is working with EMS, Sheriff and Fire Departments to design a system that will help fill the gaps in the two-way radio coverage of these first responders. Cellular phone coverage in the islands could be improved as well, as OPALCO would offer access (power, fiber optics and space on the pole) to wireless carriers.

The results of a survey conducted last fall showed that our members strongly support making OPALCO's fiber network more widely available. With this membership support, and the positive results of the feasibility study, OPALCO is hopeful it can move forward, but there are issues still to be resolved. We are currently working on these next steps:

- Due diligence. The feasibility study involved a high-level analysis. More detailed reviews of both the technical and business plans are now under way.
- Licensing of radio frequency. The wireless component of the broadband implementation will require that OPALCO acquire an FCC license for appropriate radio frequencies. Several possibilities are being explored.
- Coordination with San Juan County. This is a large and expensive project, so OPALCO needs to be in sync with the County regarding land use, access, and permitting. We are working with the County to ensure that this system can be built within the County's regulatory framework.

The goal of OPALCO's Broadband Expansion Project is to create a joint-use network that will deliver all of these benefits for the good of the community: better emergency services communication, improved electrical system reliability, high-speed internet service and the potential for improved cell phone coverage. We will continue to work hard with our partners throughout the County to build an efficient and effective system that would meet our needs and deliver the greatest possible benefits at the cost of service: it's the cooperative way. For the most up-to-date information, check in with us at www.opalco.com. We always love to hear from our members.

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