

Broadband effort has flipped the map for Orleans County

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GAINES — The two maps look like the ones you see in mobile phone commercials, the ones where the advertiser's 4G network somehow goes coast to coast without interruption and their competitor's barely splashes the scene.

They are the broadband access maps for an area running from Kendall and Holley to Lockport and Wilson - the ones used by the state to determine where a \$500 million investment is needed most.

The sea of blue saying Orleans and Niagara counties are well-served when it comes to high-speed Internet have finally been replaced by the spindly sections where services essential to education, entertainment and economic development are actually available.

The new maps are based around the parcel-by-parcel tracking done by the 10 Orleans County town highway departments last year, which along with seven Niagara municipalities found thousands of unserved properties.

They replaced a previous map which colored in a census tract as totally served if a single residence or business within it had broadband.

"New York believes our data," Niagara County Legislator and Niagara-Orleans Regional Alliance member David Godfrey said. "The New York State Broadband Office asked, and we agreed to release our data and they plotted it to GPS."

Godfrey and Orleans County Legislature Vice-Chairman Lynne Johnson told the Orleans County Supervisors & Legislators Association Tuesday that the map switch is a clear indicator their four-year broadband initiative has made in-roads in Albany.

The connection is crucial as the state prepares to award funding for broadband access expansions in communities with a clear need and a plan in place to hit the "last mile" of unserved areas. Orleans County has been denied funding in the past for not having hit both requirements.

"We proved it ... and the timing is perfect," Johnson said. "Gov. Cuomo wants everyone covered by 2019, but \$500 million will not cover everyone. We want to be in the first roll-out of funds."

Both counties are pursuing a operator-owned expansion with an unidentified Internet service provider to seek state subsidies and manage the system. Based on Godfrey's comments Tuesday, it will not be Time Warner Cable or Verizon, the biggest players in the state's broadband industry.

"It will create a competitive environment ... vendor will put some skin in the game," said

Godfrey, who noted both giants snubbed their efforts early on in the process.

With the access map issue solved, Johnson said the proof of a willing reserve of consumers is coming soon through a “proof of concept” wireless broadband service in unspecified portions of Ridgeway and Hartland.

The partnering vendor would offer broadband service to the test market using some of the privately or municipally-owned vertical assets – barns, radio towers and poles - identified by the highway departments’ surveys.