

Schools cheer new tech link

Fiber optics help Ohio institutions share data

By Katie Byard

Beacon Journal staff writer

In this season of lighting ceremonies, the University of Akron on Tuesday celebrated the lighting of a new, high-speed fiber-optic network that will connect more than 90 Ohio colleges and universities and private research centers.

The Third Frontier Network, with more than 1,600 miles of network backbone -- both below- and above-ground cable -- also will link elementary and high schools.

Supporters of the state network -- billed as the most advanced of its kind in the nation -- say it will improve education and be a catalyst for research and economic development. The pipeline -- which allows institutions to share large amounts of data -- can be used for video conferences, virtual field trips, or the sharing of high-cost instruments, for example.

"If we do this right, this can be the beginning of really putting Ohio on the map for the future," said U.S. Rep. Ralph Regula, R-Navarre, during a Tuesday program in Columbus that touted the network's capabilities. The event was broadcast to sites around the state, including the University of Akron.

Regula secured federal funding for programs related to the network. State funding was used to build the network.

UA President Luis Proenza, speaking from a UA classroom, joined the panel discussion using the Third Frontier Network.

A large screen in the front of the room broadcast the action in Columbus; Proenza could be seen speaking in part of the screen, a la television set's picture-in-a-picture mode.

Proenza said the collaboration the network allows means that institutions can benefit from "economies of scale as well as economies of talent."

Those attending the celebration in Akron included John O'Donnell, president of Stark State College of Technology in Jackson Township, and representatives of Malone College in Canton and Akron's St. Vincent-St. Mary High School.

Tuesday, Mary Jo Chionchio, project director at St. Vincent-St. Mary, said the Third

Frontier Network will allow the high school and UA to expand a partnership aimed at improving science education.

Science education students at UA already are teaching at St. Vincent-St. Mary and getting feedback from the teens about the lessons. And some of the high schoolers have collaborated with UA researchers.

Stark State said earlier this year that the network, under development for several years, will help it with fuel-cell research and commercialization of fuel cells, a project it is working on with Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland and other academic partners, including Cleveland State University.

Fuel cells are hydrogen-powered alternative fuel sources that do not cause pollution. They have been in development for about 20 years. Ohio is making a big push to create an industry focused on the technology.

Katie Byard can be reached at 330-996-3781 or kbyard@thebeaconjournal.com