

Network lets Ohio 'light the way'

Fiber-optic system may transform state

By Mark Fisher

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FAIRBORN | A powerful fiber-optic information network that allows researchers, professors and scientists throughout Ohio to work together as if their laboratories or classrooms were next door made its debut Tuesday.

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State and federal officials unveiled the Third Frontier Network in Columbus in front of a live video conference that included participation from six sites around Ohio, including Wright State University.

Gov. Bob Taft said Ohio "will light the way" for other states that are seeking to develop statewide networks to share information and create jobs. The network, Taft said, "will transform teaching and learning and will accelerate the commercialization of new knowledge throughout Ohio."

The Third Frontier Network is much faster and more powerful than existing computer networks and can be divided into separate channels, each of which can hold much more data than current broadband lines, state officials said. The fiber-optic network will connect Ohio's colleges and universities with Ohio's federal research laboratories, including Wright-Patterson Air Force Base as well as to hospitals and K-12 schools.

State officials secured the 1,600-mile "backbone" of the network by purchasing unused fiber-optic cable from private telecommunications carriers starting in 2003. Eleven state-supported colleges and universities have direct access to the network, with additional campuses, their industry research partners, federal facilities and K-12 schools to connect during the summer of 2005 as finances and logistics permit, Ohio Board of Regents officials said. The University of Dayton is connected. A \$400,000 National Science Foundation grant will allow Central State University, Wilberforce University and Cedarville University to join the network within the next two months, said Al Stutz, director of the Ohio Academic Resources Network, which will operate the system.

The state government has committed \$19 million to the project through the Ohio Board of Regents, and the federal government has allocated at least \$7.3 million. State officials said the investment has begun to pay dividends: the network was instrumental in a decision by LexisNexis to locate a data management center in Springfield because of the network's high-speed connections to Dayton.

Steven Berberich, WSU faculty member and director of WSU's Center for Genomics Research, said the network will allow the university's biomedical researchers working with the Cincinnati Genome Research Institute to transfer large amounts of data between the labs and their offices. WSU researchers have studied treatment of ovarian, brain and colon cancers.

The network will pay other medical benefits by connecting medical schools with Ohio children's hospitals and select community hospitals to allow physicians to communicate better and to improve access to specialists in rural or other under-served areas, state officials said.