Ohio is first to 'light up' new data network

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Ohio's new high-speed fiber-optic network puts the Buckeye State in the passing lane on the information highway, according to its architects.

The Third Frontier Network, showcased on Tuesday during a "lighting" ceremony, has the capacity to link more than 90 Ohio colleges and universities with industry researchers, medical centers, federal labs and thousands of K-12 schools.

Its architects say the network -- meant to promote education, research and economic development -- is the most advanced of its kind nationwide. Hundreds of times faster than current broadband, the "superscale" computing network will allow researchers at opposite ends of the state to work together in real time, sharing resources and data.

The Ohio Board of Regents, the statewide coordinating body for higher education, committed $19 million for construction of the network, which also has drawn more than $7 million in federal money. OARnet, a division of the Ohio Supercomputer Center, is building and managing the network.

Al Stutz, director of OARnet, said Ohio is about 18 to 24 months ahead of competing states' projects. Most of Ohio's colleges and universities are using the fiber optic backbone and 11 already have direct network access, according to the regents. More sites -- including schools, businesses and federal labs -- are expected to begin connecting next summer.

Mark Collar, president of Procter & Gamble Pharmaceuticals, said the benefits of high-performance networking could dramatically shorten the time it takes to transform a basic discovery into commercial applications for the marketplace. That gives Ohio's economy a competitive advantage, he said.

Dr. Fred Sanfilippo, senior vice president for health services at the Ohio State University Medical Center and dean of OSU's medical school, said the Third Frontier Network also holds great promise to change the way health care is delivered. For instance, doctors could create an electronic record that would follow a patient, instead of essentially starting from scratch when seeing someone for the first time.

Physicians would get instant access to test results from another facility and a means of sharing patient data to consult with specialists, even from the most rural parts of the state.

Sanfilippo said he envisions personalized health care, with doctors able to diagnose and treat each patient more quickly and effectively. Such improvements, he predicted, could lead to better results, shorter hospital stays and -- as a result -- lower health care costs.