

TELECOM

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over the country, or even chat with a grandmother walking with her grandchildren to the post office, and you'll hear the same thing: this part of the county can get online pretty easily.

"We have very good high speed internet," said Todd Bright, an owner of an insurance company in Kensington, about five miles from Farwell. "I think wherever you have Runestone, you have a pretty good connection."

Josh Andreasen, who works in the same office, said friends living near Lake Latoka have much poorer internet access than he does, "Which is odd to me because they are closer to Alex."

There's a huge difference between Runestone and for-profit internet providers, such as national providers CenturyLink or Charter Communications. Runestone is a cooperative with 20-25 employees, based in Hoffman and owned by its members, and concentrates on a multi-county area. CenturyLink, based in Louisiana, employs about 50,000 people in dozens of countries and is publicly traded. Charter serves 28 million customers with 98,000 employees.

Runestone represents "kind of the opposite model," said general manager Kent Hedstrom. "We don't need to take all the money and shove it in our pocket. We like to reinvest and provide good customer service."

How they did it

The first place Runestone installed fiber optic cable was in Norcross, a Grant County town with a few dozen residents and a post office. It's a 20-minute drive to the nearest grocery store or doctor's office, and in 2006 it was relying on copper to get online, and the copper was deteriorating.

"We were spending a lot of time running out there fixing things," Hedstrom said. "If you had the plow in the ground anyway, you might as well get them the best possible service."

Linda and Robert Schmidt, who moved to Norcross in 2002, had been using dial-up internet and were surprised and delighted when Runestone brought in fiber optic.

"That amazed me totally," said Linda, who watches her grandson and his friends do wheelies and race snowmobiles on their YouTube channel, CBoysTV, which has more than 440,000 subscribers. "We're very thankful. We're always looking up things. When we need to know something we run to the internet."

"You don't have to sit and sit and wait and wait," agreed Robert, who is



Karen Tolkinen / Echo Press

Runestone Telecom Association manager Kent Hedstrom stands next to a spool of fiber optic cable in Hoffman. Each spool holds up to three miles of cable.

now the Norcross mayor.

In 2007, Runestone ran fiber optic to Tintah, Wendell and the west half of Elbow Lake in Grant and Traverse counties.

"We've jumped around since then," Hedstrom said.

It is one of the rural telecoms that is pushing the boundaries of its traditional service area, running fiber optic to places like Holmes City and toward Lake Andrew in Douglas County.

Its goal for the end of 2019 is to enable all rural customers in its service area to access a gigabyte of internet service if they wish, Hedstrom said. That level moves so much data so quickly that most people won't need it — but they can, if they want.

Within their means

Runestone faced two options when it first began installing fiber optic line, Hedstrom said. They could have borrowed massive sums and done it quickly. But board members felt it was more financially responsible to pay as they went.

It's an approach that has left Runestone on strong financial footing, said Hedstrom and board chairman Bob Leegaard.

"I'm proud to say the co-op doesn't owe any money and we're able to pay dividends every year," Leegaard said. "It's not the board's money but it's our job to look after the patron's money. We felt it was a better thing to live within our means."

According to Runestone's IRS Form 990 from 2017, it had \$1 million left after expenses, and its assets far outweighed its liabilities.

Runestone has acquired two state grants totaling \$890,000 for some of its work in Holmes City. In one of Runestone's grant applications, it cited many reasons better internet access was needed for area.

For starters, it said, good access can

keep residents from leaving rural areas, reduce economic disparities, and ease the digital divide.

"In addition to brick and mortar businesses, numerous home-based businesses and telecommuters will benefit," it said. "As will about 32 school children who live in the area who are either home schooled or attend school in Alexandria, MN. At present, many of them cannot complete daily assignments, participate in team projects or conduct research necessary for papers and reports from home."

Fiber takes time

Running fiber optic line to new customers takes time. Companies have to go through a permitting process, contacting the DNR, the railroads and the Minnesota Department of Transportation. All that can take several months, Hedstrom said.

Companies have to wait for the legislature to approve grant spending. In 2018, the legislature approved funding for border-to-border grants, which are specifically aimed at providing internet access to underserved and unserved areas, but the funding fell through when then-Gov. Mark Dayton vetoed the budget package it was in.

This year, the Minnesota Legislature approved \$20 million for those grants for each of the next two years. The application deadline for the 2019 grants is in September.

When communications providers finally get the go-ahead, they face Minnesota's short construction season, hiring seasonal workers and trying to get as much in the ground as possible.

Summertime is when crews get lines and equipment on the ground; fall and winter is when technicians do the above-ground work, and it'll be sometime in early 2020 when Bagley and others in Farwell will be able to get fiber service, Hedstrom said.

DOUGLAS

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took office in 2018, her salary was \$60,000.

► Sheriff Troy Wolbersen received a 2 percent increase with his \$2,400 increase. His salary in 2019 was \$120,000 and his salary for 2020 will be \$122,400. He made \$115,000 in 2018, \$102,000 in 2017, \$98,000 in 2016 and \$93,000 in 2015.

Other budget items

In addition to salary increases, the commissioners approved several other budget requests for 2020, including allocations of:

► \$138,314 to the Viking Library System. This is a 2 percent increase over 2019.

► \$258,834 to the Douglas County Soil and Water Conservation, with \$12,503 of that amount coming from a state water grant. This is the same amount as in 2019.

► \$8,250 to West Central Initiative, an increase of \$250. Rapp was the only commissioner to vote no for the increase.

► \$45,000 to Alexandria Area Economic Development Commission, a decrease of \$2,692.

Each year, the commissioners also allocate funds to the Douglas County Historical Society. This year, the non-profit organization requested \$20,000.

Rapp made a motion to deny the request and allocate the same amount as was given in 2019, which was \$12,000. His motion failed by a vote of 3-2. Rapp and county board chairman Charlie Meyer voted in favor of the \$12,000 amount, but commissioners Heather Larson, Tim Kalina and Keith Englund voted against it.

Englund then made a motion to allocate \$15,000 instead, and it passed by a 3-2 vote. Englund, Kalina and Larson voted for the increase, while Rapp and Meyer opposed it.

Commissioners also approved a wage grid for employees who aren't represented by a union, which includes a 2 percent cost-of-living increase. The grid represents the annual wages for those who are paid based on what grade and step they are at. For instance, if an employee is at a grade 12, step 5, they will be paid an hourly rate of \$33.24 in 2020. There are 23 different grades and 10 different steps. The example is about the middle of both.

The grid was approved by a 4-1 vote, with Larson voting no.

The board will take action on more budget items, including allocations for the Alexandria Area Chamber of Commerce and Pride of the Lakes, at its Sept. 3 board meeting.



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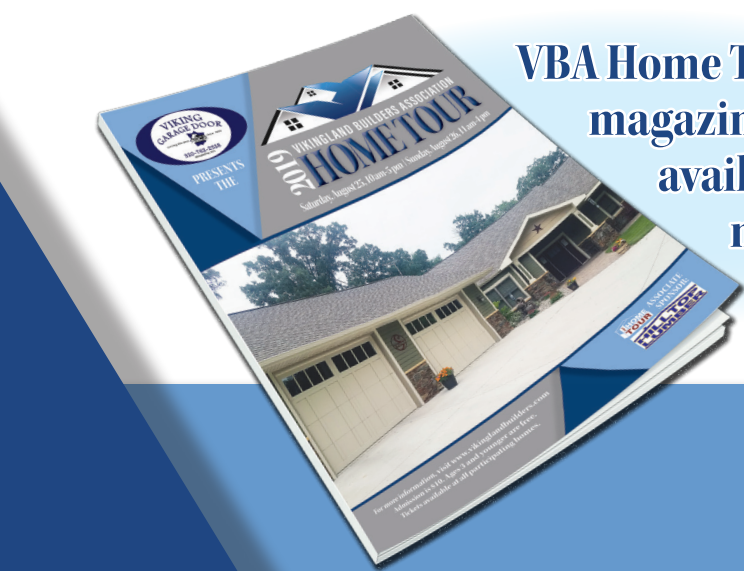
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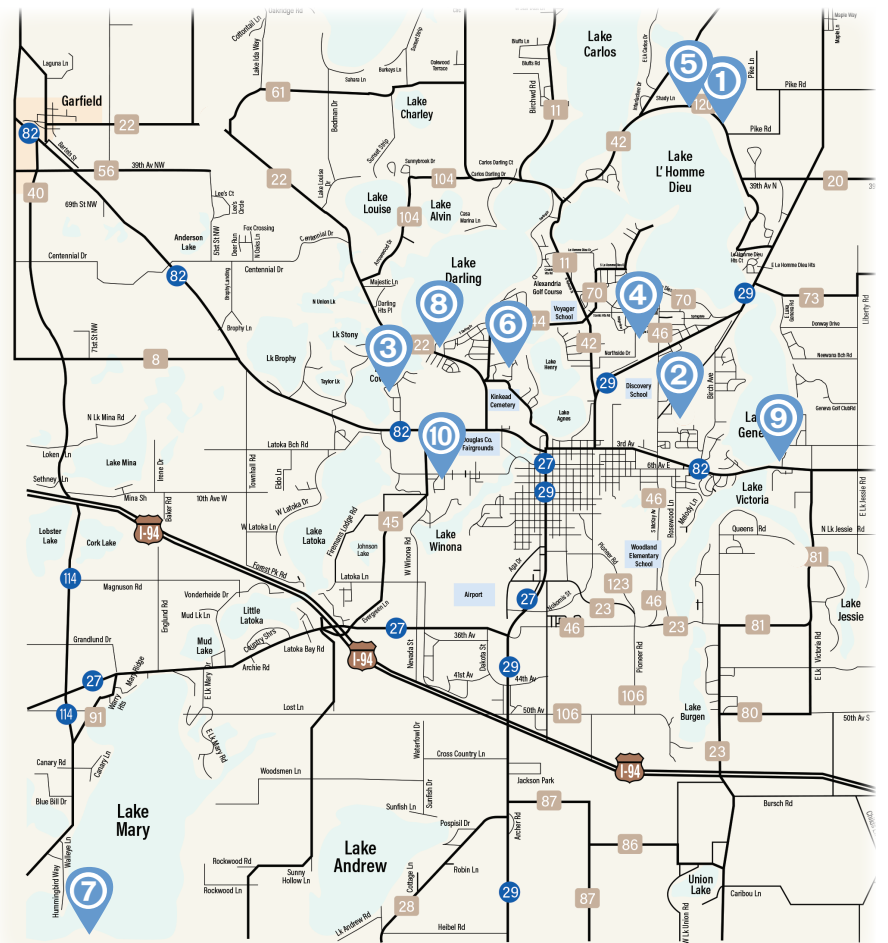
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| 4 Highpoint Homes | 1439 Deerwood Dr NE, Alexandria |
| 5 Northwoods Construction | 2372 County Road 120 NE, Alexandria |
| 6 JaCon & Sterns Construction Management | 1102 Curt Felt Dr., Alexandria |
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