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Broadband push seeks gaps in connectivity

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

Broadband is a rather dull word, until you lack it, or lose it. Suddenly, the coined phrase for internet connectivity becomes all important. “Economic development companies want to come into an area that has very strong broadband connectivity. We need broadband that is robust here,” said Dr. Ronda Sauget, executive director and CEO of Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois. Sauget and colleagues from the economic development organization have been active for months spreading awareness about broadband, a service that most people take for granted. There are enough gaps in signals that some folks in Southwestern Illinois remain concerned. Leadership Council is conducting a lengthy survey to find out from leaders and other professionals about the pervasiveness of the problem. The survey is being conducted in a nine-county area and in a bilanguage format. The end result will be a map with signal gaps that can be shown to internet service providers in hopes of finding solutions. “The COVID challenge and everyone working from home have put such a stress on the current infrastructure. It really shows where we have weaknesses in the system,” Sauget said. “Even in some of the best communities.” An example: The O’Fallon school system experienced places where there were gaps. Officials had to seek out wireless “hotspots” and park buses so students could do their school work. “And that’s O’Fallon, right by Scott Air Force Base (a hub of cyber logistics),” she said. Some of the base’s



Broadband photos courtesy of The Leadership Council of Southwestern Illinois.

own workforce works from home and lacking good broadband service. “That was one of the reasons the Scott team participates in the steering committee. Connectivity from home isn’t as robust as it should be. We’re not unlike a lot of other places,” Sauget said. Leadership Council was chosen one of 12 entities and communities to be part of an initiative sponsored by the Illinois Office of Broadband. That relationship came about after Leadership Council reached out to Matt Schmit, deputy director of broadband in the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, to ask questions about connectivity when COVID was taking hold last spring. Schmitt told them of \$15,000 grants available for help with such endeavors. The council applied and won. A consulting firm hired by the state to help assist with broadband issues, called the Benton Institute for Broadband and Society, put Leadership Council in touch with a national nonprofit that helps get



computers into the homes of people who need them. The nonprofit, PCs for People, was seeking to come to Southwestern Illinois to do some of its work. An overture from Leadership Council helped convince PCs for People to set up a warehouse in Belleville where it employs about 18 people. The organization was looking at a multitude of other areas, Sauget said. PCs for People takes gently used computers, wipes them clean, loads new software, makes sure they are in good working order and redistributes them back at little or no cost to underserved or vulnerable populations. Overall, Leadership Council is using a multifaceted approach in addressing broadband, Sauget said. “It’s very similar to (what we’ve done) with the levees and multimodal,” she said referring to other big campaigns in recent years. “We were kind of thrust into it by the pandemic. It really gives you an appreciation for what’s really needed here in the region.”

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Biometrics seen as costly issue for companies

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

The use of people’s personally identifying physical information can be costly for businesses, thanks to laws aiming to clamp down on privacy concerns. The understanding of the field of biometrics is still relatively new, even though it’s been around for generations. Recent advances



Schowalter

in technology and the potential invasiveness make biometrics the subject of new discussions among legal experts concerned about the liabilities for companies that employ such things as payroll thumbprint scanners and surveillance cameras, or who share information with third-party vendors. Illinois became the first state to regulate the collection of such data, passing the Biometric Information Privacy Act in Illinois, commonly called BIPA, on Oct. 3, 2008. Washington and Texas, and possibly other states, have since passed similar laws. The law in Illinois, though, remains the only law in the U.S. that allows private individuals to file a lawsuit for damages stemming from a violation. The act calls for \$1,000 per violation, and \$5,000 per violation if the violation is intentional or reckless. BIPA has spawned several class action lawsuits.

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Troy area chamber brings job info online with virtual fairs

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

Virtual job fairs are one way to reach potential hires during a pandemic, and a local chamber is taking that service seriously. Dawn Mushill, executive director of the Troy-Maryville-St. Jacob-Marine Chamber of Commerce, has started one of the first such fairs staged by a chamber of



Mushill

commerce. The event was held for the first time in December, repeated in January and will be held again on March 9. “Marketing of business is definitely different than it once was,” she said. The first was so successful that eight employers signed on for the one in December, and several others were ready to go as fill-ins. “We’re going to have one every month.” The event will be held at 9 a.m. on the second Tuesday “from here on out, if we get the employers,” she said. The fair has been limited to eight participating employers because of the format, which allows firm rep-

resentatives to speak for 10 minutes each. Then, there is a Q & A. “It can get too complicated if we have more,” she said. “We don’t want it to go over 90 minutes.” Several of the employers have participated more than once. The original eight were: Express Employment Professionals; Hospice of Southern Illinois; Gateway Regional Medical Center; Geodis (a logistics company); HSHS Medical Group; Lochmueller Group (an engineering and consulting firm); Anderson Hospital and Community Hospital of Staunton.

“There is a big need out there, people looking for jobs. And probably a bigger need by employers looking for people,” Mushill said. “We’ll do this every month until there is no need. I hope someday there is no need but I’m not sure if that will happen.” If enough employers sign on, the fairs may become two-day events each month, she said. The fairs have served as a forum to bring people together who had been blocked by the pandemic.

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