

INSIDE FR

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Volt holds Jan 11 launch meeting

Volt Broadband representatives, local and statewide officials held a launch meeting Jan. 11 at the company's office in Rayville.

Volt Broadband, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Winnsboro-based Northeast Louisiana Power Cooperative, plans to build out a fiber optic internet network for their customers residing and working in NELPCO's seven-parish territory footprint.

"We are pleased to be able to bring this to the customers we already serve through the power cooperative," said NELPCO and Volt Broadband General Manager Jeff Church. "Moving forward with this broadband initiative was approved by the cooperative board in June of last year, and we've been working toward this since that time."

"As you can imagine, this is certainly not a simple process and, as with any project of this type, there are many legal and political roads we must travel down before construction starts," he said. "This process is on-going and we are anxious to begin construction and launch this service for our membership."

A number of elected officials from throughout NELPCO's footprint were in attendance at the kick-off meeting, including numerous state senators and representatives, along with parish law enforcement and local government officials, cooperative board members, and interested citizens.

Public Service Commissioner Foster Campbell and Veneeth Iyengar with the Governor's Office were also in attendance.

"You all know I'm a lifelong Democrat," said Commissioner Campbell. "But, this is not a Democrat or Republican project, this is a people deal. This is far bigger than our politics because it's about helping people get educated and businesses get connected."

"There's no wrong way to do the right thing, and this is the right thing for the people of northeast Louisiana," he added.

In addition, Jonathan Chambers of Conexon was on hand to discuss his company's involvement in the upcoming project. The company will be working with Volt Broadband to construct the network which will utilize the NELPCO power grid infrastructure. Chambers, a partner at Conexon based in Kansas City, Missouri, has worked for over thirty years at start-up telecommunications companies, as well as in government with the FCC.

For the majority of his career, Chambers has worked with scores of electric cooperatives building broadband networks to bring fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) broadband to the customers they serve.

"We're very pleased to be a part of this project," he told those in attendance. "The Volt Broadband initiative is different from any other broadband project in the state of Louisiana. Volt is wholly owned by the NELPCO and, because of that, they will follow the long-established cooperative principles that have been successfully followed since they first brought electricity to the rural area as many years ago."

"At Conexon, we'll follow those same principles as we move forward in this project, meaning we will build the same high quality network to every single cooperative member, and we will do so quickly."

Chambers said that once the actual construction work begins, it will move at a fast pace.

"We plan to build this network over the course of the next two years," Chambers said. "In just two years, one hundred percent of the members of Northeast Louisiana



LOUISIANA PUBLIC Service Commissioner Foster Campbell (left) is shown discussing the proposed Volt Broadband initiative with Jonathan Chambers of Conexon (center) and Volt Broadband and Northeast Louisiana Power Cooperative General Manager Jeff Churchwell (right). Chambers is a partner in the company working with the cooperative to bring fiber optic internet service to NELPCO members throughout the co-op's seven parish territory. A launch meeting for the project was held at the company's office in Rayville on January 11. (Courtesy photo)

Power Cooperative will have access to the best levels of internet service available anywhere in the country, right here in rural northeast Louisiana, and the services will be very affordable."

Conexon works primarily with electrical cooperatives across the country and has managed the construction of more fiber optic networks than any company in the country. Their approach uses a unique architecture and methodology that complements an electric cooperative's power grid. Fiber optic cable is overlaid on the co-op existing infrastructure to offer lightning-fast speeds and reliability directly to a home or business. This allows the cooperative to provide world-class internet speeds at very affordable prices.

Iyengar, who serves in the Governor's office as the Executive Director for Broadband Development & Connectivity, noted the wide array of public officials in attendance at the meeting.

"There are people here who represent law enforcement, as well as

legislators, community members, police jurors, and our power co-ops," he said. "This signals that broadband is one of those rare issues that summarily impacts everyone's ability to be successful both professionally and personally."

I give a hat tip to everyone in this room for their commitment to bridging the digital divide we see in our state," Iyengar added.

NELPCO employees over 60 people, with offices in Winnsboro, Oak Grove and Bastrop. Their service territory runs from south of Turkey Creek Lake in Franklin Parish north to the Arkansas line, and extends into Morehouse Parish.

Currently NELPCO has approximately 11,000 customers and over 2,600 miles of electrified lines in the 2,180 square miles served across the seven-parish region.

NELPCO Board members serving on the Volt Broadband Board include Ronald Pippin of Lake Providence, Alton Welch, Jr. of Pioneer, Weldon Fitch of Bastrop and Richard Strong of Oak Grove.