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Rural areas in Alachua County may get improved internet with SpaceX, Windstream services

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Using video conferencing technology that's become all too familiar for many Alachua County residents, Rep. Kat Cammack, R-Gainesville, on Wednesday discussed with about a dozen county and municipality leaders plans to expand high-speed broadband services to the county's rural areas.

"My hope is that we have this conversation on a regular basis as we work to increase broadband throughout the county," she said at the virtual roundtable.

A lack of internet access, especially in rural parts of the county in Hawthorne, High Springs, Newberry, Waldo and unincorporated areas, impacts at least 36,000 residents, according to data from the Federal Communications Commission.

Cammack said the FCC's estimate is likely too low, considering that it accounts for a [minimum download speed](#) of 25 megabits per second and upload speed of three megabits per second. That rate makes it difficult to perform tasks like schoolwork, stream video calls and watch videos, especially if more than one person in a household is trying to do those tasks at once. In the age of COVID-19, those are the daily needs for many families.

A better minimum rate to aim for, Cammack suggested, is a download speed of 100 megabits per second and upload speed of 50 megabits per second — 100/50 Mb/s.

"By and large, when you have such a bare minimum threshold, 25/3 [Mb/s] is really a joke," she said. "We have got to have reliable high speed to do [daily internet tasks.]"

Bridging the gap

The [Rural Digital Opportunity Fund](#) is the FCC's latest step in bridging the digital divide. At the end of 2020, the RDOF's phase one auction ended with 180 bidders winning \$9.2 billion to provide broadband to 5.2 million locations across the country over 10 years.

Two bidders won auctions in Alachua County: Windstream, with about \$1 million, and SpaceX, with about \$300,000.

The companies have periodic build-out requirements to fulfill. Depending on the location,

they have between three and six years to complete the build-out necessary for new grids.

Also under the FCC's contract, the grid must be ready for use within 10 years, on a timeline decided by the company. A minimum speed of 100/20 Mb/s also is required.

Arkansas-based Windstream filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2019 to address debts it accrued following a court ruling against one of its subsidiaries. A Southern District of New York court ruled that Windstream Services LLC's 2015 spinoff of certain telecommunications network assets into a real estate investment trust violated its agreements with bondholders.

Cammack said she planned to speak with Windstream about the bankruptcy and whether it will impact the speed of broadband expansion in North Central Florida. A majority of Windstream's coverage area, according to FCC maps, includes parts of Newberry and High Springs.

Space Exploration Technologies Corp., or SpaceX, is the aerospace manufacturer and space transportation services company founded by Elon Musk.

SpaceX's [Starlink](#) program hopes to expand its high-speed, low-latency broadband globally. Latency is the time it takes to send data from one point to the next. When satellites are far from Earth, latency is high and performance on tasks like video calls are poor.

SpaceX has already launched about 1,000 low-orbit satellites, but has plans to launch a total of 12,500. A majority of its Alachua County coverage area, according to FCC maps, includes most of Hawthorne and parts of Newberry.

Cammack said she's not sure where Alachua County fits in SpaceX's far-reaching goals, in terms of a timeline.

"If I have to bring Elon to the district, I will," she said. "We're going to make sure we're a constant pain in their side. We're not in a position where we can wait for 10 years."

The RDOF auctions have a second phase that will be underway later this year. In the meantime, the FCC is updating its mapping technology to provide a better picture of under-served areas and areas with no broadband connection.

Increasing speed, decreasing costs Hawthorne Mayor Matt Surrency said he's interested in finding Florida cooperatives that might be interested in bringing broadband to rural Alachua County, which has been done in parts of neighboring Levy County.

"If we can have multiple and prevent a monopoly, that can help with affordability because competition in the free market will drive down prices," he said.

County Commissioner Mary Alford said urban parts of the county also suffer from slow speeds, which ought to be addressed as well.

“There’s pockets in our urban areas that are also under-served,” she said. “Covid has made it clear that we don’t have speeds where they should be.”

Alford, along with Gainesville City Commissioner Gigi Simmons and High Springs Public Information Officer Kevin Mangan, said they favor expanding Gainesville Regional Utilities’ GRUCom’s high-speed access beyond current service areas, which largely include public schools.

Cammack and Simmons said they plan to have further discussions about that possibility with GRU.

“We want to be able to have GRUCom throughout the county,” said Simmons, who chairs Gainesville’s digital access committee. “But we need to look at the cost associated with that.”

