CONNECTIONS

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Growing the Telework Economy

Co-hort leader Zach Barricklow speaks to a statewide audience during the IEI Forum at N.C. State. Photo courtesy of Institute for Emerging Issues

While COVID-19 has brought greater attention to the topic of telework out of necessity, it's been on the minds of local education, business and community leaders for some time.

In late 2019, SkyLine was invited to be part of a co-hort with Wilkes Community College for the Institute for Emerging Issues' (IEI) "ReCONNECT to Technological Opportunity Series" at N.C. State University, a three-year initiative to address solutions to North Carolina's most pressing issues. The WCC-led co-hort is creating a renewed awareness of the tremendous broadband assets of this region by showcasing their strengths and working to expand the region's telework economy.

The interagency, intercountry initiative brings greater focus to the region's fiber assets as it catalogues and showcases the telework stories shared by entrepreneurs, teleworkers and freelancers. Co-hort leader Zach Barricklow, who moved with his family to Sparta several years ago to begin teleworking and is now Vice President of Strategy for Wilkes Community College, says that northwest North Carolina is telework ready. "We have access to stronger residential internet connectivity here than our friends in Raleigh, Charlotte, Asheville and Wilmington and almost every rural community in between. Even the friends who have good internet in those places don't have access to the open spaces – mountains, valleys, rivers, creeks, trails and the like – that we have in our backyard."

During the Institute's Forum event at N.C. State University in February, Barricklow presented on behalf of the co-hort, introducing a statewide audience to this corner of the state where a high percentage of homes and businesses can access fiber-based, Gigabit-capable broadband, and citing the natural beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains, low population density, growing cultural amenities and better quality of life free from long commutes.

Laura Paynter and Patrick Hollowell work from home on their farm in Alleghany County. Photo: Todd Bush Photography

As a key collaborative partner, SkyLine committed $5,000 to Wilkes Community College's telework expansion initiative, specifically toward building a comprehensive strategic plan including research, benchmarking and other key elements. The plan's overall objective is to ultimately empower our local workforce with access to wider economic opportunity.

Pictured left to right: WCC Vice President of Strategy Zach Barricklow; WCC Vice President of Institutional Advancement Allison Phillips; Dr. Jeff Cox, WCC president; SkyLine PR Administrator Karen Powell; and SkyLine Chief Marketing and Sales Officer Edward Hinson.

SkyLine Assists Ashe School System with Fiber Installations at WiFi Hotspots to Ensure Student Access to Broadband

While still in the midst of a pandemic, public school reopening plans for the fall included giving families a choice to follow the state's Plan B, which is a hybrid between in-person and remote instruction, or virtual-only (stay at home) instruction for the fall 2020 academic year.

For either scenario, broadband availability became a top priority. Ashe County Schools developed a plan to establish WiFi hotspots at targeted locations throughout the county where clusters of need existed or where drive-up access could be readily available. The school system reached out to Ashe County Local Government IT, Ashe County Emergency Management, SkyLine and Blue Ridge Energy to offer technical assistance and support for this initiative.

SkyLine provided fiber connections at eight of the 21 sites to provide WiFi broadband access to students through school-issued devices to ensure a strong and more equitable start to the new academic year.

SkyLine's John Stuerwald completes a fiber service installation at one of the 21 WiFi hotspot locations established by Ashe County Schools that are now providing broadband access needed for remote instruction.

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Phishing: Don't Take the Bait

Phishing is when you get emails, texts, or calls that seem to be from companies or people you know. But they're actually from scammers. They want you to click on a link or give personal information (like a password) so that they can steal your money or identity, and maybe get access to your computer.
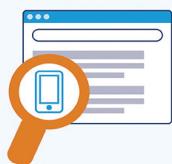
The Bait

Scammers use familiar company names or pretend to be someone you know.

They ask you to click on a link or give passwords or bank account numbers. If you click on the link, they can install programs that lock you out of your computer and can steal your personal information.

They pressure you to act now — or something bad will happen.

Avoid the Hook

Check it out.
» Look up the website or phone number for the company or person who's contacting you.
» Call that company or person directly. Use a number you know to be correct, not the number in the email or text.
» Tell them about the message you got.

Look for scam tip-offs.
» You don't have an account with the company.
» The message is missing your name or uses bad grammar and spelling.
» The person asks for personal information, including passwords.
» **But note: some phishing schemes are sophisticated and look very real,** so check it out and protect yourself.
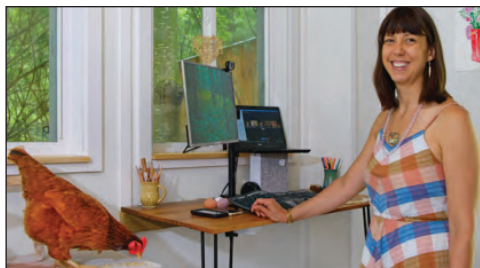
Hi Ms. Fish,,

Protect yourself.
» Keep your computer security up to date and back up your data often.
» Consider multi-factor authentication — a second step to verify who you are, like a text with a code — for accounts that support it.
» Change any compromised passwords right away and don't use them for any other accounts.

Report Phishing

» Forward phishing emails to **spam@uce.gov** and **reportphishing@apwg.org**.
» Report it to the FTC at **ftc.gov/complaint**.

For more information, visit **ftc.gov/phishing** **aba.com/phishing**

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Paynter says there is no way she and Hollowell could spend any significant time here without the quality internet connection they have. Photo: Todd Bush Photography

TELEWORK ECONOMY *CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1*

Another telework success story in the co-hort's catalogue is that of Laura Paynter and Patrick Hollowell, who live on a 35-acre farm in Alleghany County. Paynter is a senior analytic specialist for a financial services company, and Hollowell is self-employed as an IT/Telecom consultant for large manufacturers, financial services companies and medical practices.

"SkyBest brought fiber to our property six years ago at no cost to us," Hollowell says. "It's been great to have such rock-solid fiber internet. Our service here is faster, cheaper and more reliable than the 30 Mbps DSL line in Charlotte. I bill by the hour, so service downtime would be lost revenue. Fortunately, we've never had an internet blip. Not one."

Paynter, whose office is attached to their barn, looks out over the intersection of two creeks, their pond and cabin. "Sometimes, I'll set a chair in the creek with my laptop, sit and listen in on conference calls," Paynter says. "My 'commute' consists of walking past the pond, over the bridge across Meadowfork Creek, into our little nook of the valley. It's a dream come true every day."

Recipe of the Month

Chocolate Zucchini Sheet Cake

Ingredients:
2 cups sugar
1 cup vegetable oil
3 eggs
2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1/4 cup baking cocoa
1 teaspoon baking soda
1/4 teaspoon baking powder
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup milk
2 cups shredded fresh zucchini
1 tablespoon vanilla extract

Frosting:
1/2 cup butter or margarine
1/4 cup baking cocoa
6 tablespoons evaporated milk
1 pound confectionery sugar
1 tablespoon vanilla extract

Instructions:
In a large mixing bowl, combine sugar and oil. Add eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Combine flour, cocoa, baking soda, baking powder and salt; gradually add to the egg mixture alternately with the milk. Stir in the zucchini and extract. Pour into a greased 15x10x1-inch baking pan. Bake at 375 degrees for 25 minutes or until cake tests done. While cake is baking, combine all frosting ingredients. Mix until smooth. Spread frosting over cake while hot. Cool on wire rack.

Recipe submitted by Barbara Jennings of Alleghany County