



Fiber in Calhoun

Crews with Wiemelt Excavating working on fiber construction near Batchtown.

In the spring of last year, the co-op began fiber internet installations in the southern part of Calhoun County. Now, over 500 residents of Calhoun County have high-speed, reliable internet, thanks to the cooperative's fiber efforts. Making fiber internet a reality in Calhoun was many years in the making.

Illinois Electric Cooperative first began providing internet service in 1993. At the time, the motivation was simple: there was no way for rural residents to get internet in their homes, and we wanted to change that. Over the past 28 years, the co-op has drastically improved its infrastructure to increase bandwidth

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Internet Technician Drew Klingele working on a fiber drop in Hardin.

speeds across its electric service territory. Today the co-op provides wireless and fiber internet to over 5,000 consumers.

The co-op first began its journey to bringing fiber optic internet to Calhoun County in 2014. That year, the FCC announced the Rural Broadband Experiment. This \$100 million funded program looked for rural areas where they could establish and test new technologies, such as fiber internet, to understand better the technological divide faced by rural areas. The co-op applied for funding fiber internet in Calhoun County, but unfortunately, the co-op was not awarded a grant.

In 2016, the Connect America Funds (CAF) II auction was announced. This was a reverse auction where funds were distributed to internet service providers for broadband projects across the country. While preparing for the CAF II auction in 2016, Illinois Electric Cooperative Design

Engineer Kurtis Weber and contractors designed a countywide build-out plan for fiber internet.

It was a two-year process that included conducting studies, doing groundwork, and preparing bids. The co-op made bids for blocks across our territory in 2018, but again, the co-op was not awarded funds for Calhoun County.

With co-op members in Calhoun at a technological disadvantage, the co-op continued to look for opportunities to bring reliable, high-speed internet to the county. One specific opportunity that was brought to the attention of Calhoun officials and the co-op was the FCC's E-Rate program. The E-Rate program aims to bring affordable broadband to schools and libraries.

Calhoun Schools and Brussels School system each applied for E-Rate funding through the FCC and the Illinois State School Board of Education. Both school

systems were awarded funds, and Illinois Electric Cooperative was chosen as the contractor. Calhoun Schools and Brussels Schools have fast, reliable internet today due to the E-Rate program.

In 2019, the co-op launched CalhounFiber.com to collect interest in fiber internet from residents in Calhoun County. Over 1,600 residents have signed up to request service to date.

Illinois Electric Cooperative was awarded a \$3,443,670 grant through Connect Illinois in 2020. The grant is specifically intended to help fund fiber internet in Hardin, Kampsville, Brussels, Winneberg, and Batchtown in Calhoun County.

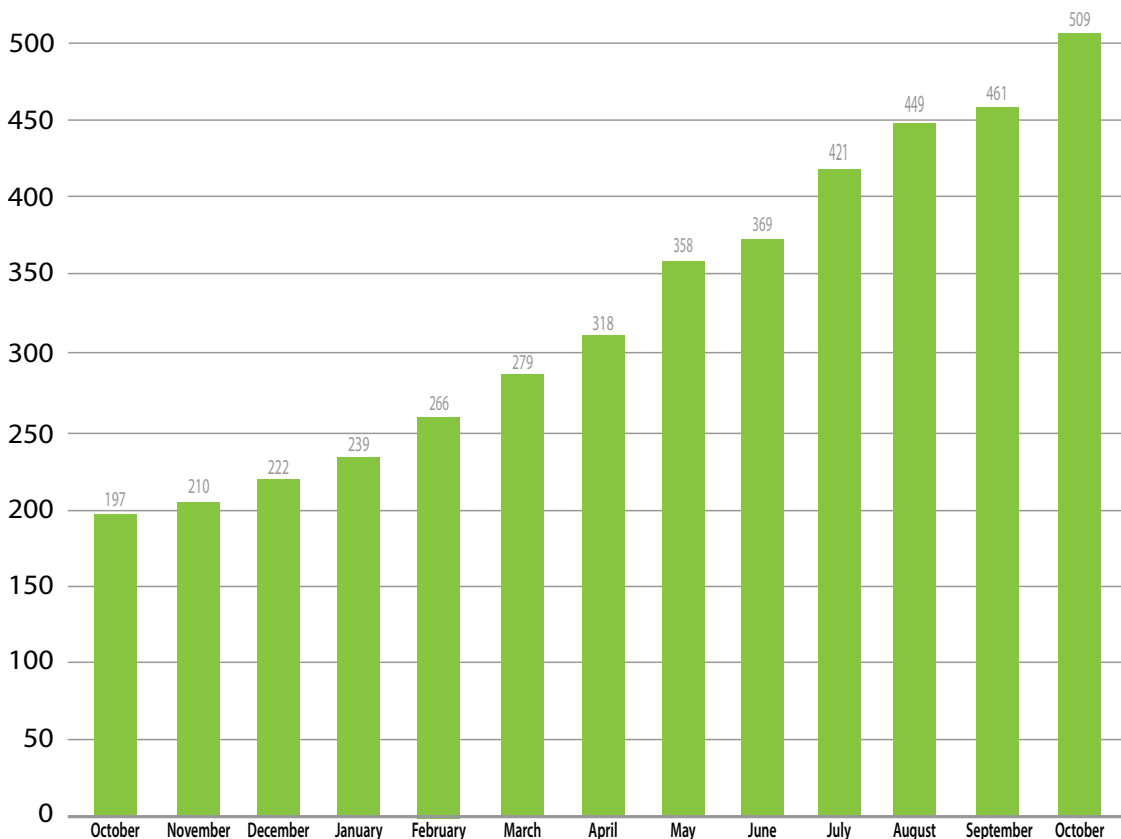
For the first round of funding, Connect Illinois awarded \$50 million of the \$420 million available statewide for broadband expansion under Governor Pritzker's and the Department of Commerce and

Economic Opportunity's Rebuild Illinois program. Twenty-eight broadband projects by 18 internet service providers, rural cooperatives, nonprofits, and local governments were selected from across the state.

Grant applications were reviewed and evaluated on a competitive basis, with proposals assessed in seven categories: broadband impact; matching funds; community support; project readiness; project sustainability; broadband adoption assistance; and shared use/open access. Applicants were eligible for up to \$5 million per project, and they were required to provide a non-state funding match of at least 50 percent. The goal of Connect Illinois is to expand broadband across the entire state with a focus on improving telehealth, education, and economic development.

"Rural Electric co-ops have always answered the call to serve their member's

Calhoun Fiber Connections





A crew member with Wiemelt Excavating finishing up a fiber drop in Hardin.

needs. Over 80 years ago, we did it by providing electric service when no one else would. Today, Illinois Electric is doing the same thing by providing internet service," Randy Long, General Manager of the co-op, shared. "Providing reliable broadband service to Calhoun County will help close the digital divide and create the same opportunities their urban counterparts enjoy today. It gives us great pleasure to provide this much-needed service to the schools, businesses, and people of Calhoun County."

With fiber construction recently finishing in Hardin, crews have started fiber build-out in Batchtown. Once Batchtown is completed, as part of the Connect Illinois funding, crews will begin work in the village of Kampsville.

"Everyone involved has been working hard to get fiber to everyone that wants it in Calhoun. I'm proud of our work so far, and we're getting closer to our goal each day," Kurtis Weber, Design Engineer, shared. "We know people are eager to get fiber, and would like to know when.

If we give timelines, we want to make sure they are accurate. With the variables we face today, it's impossible to give an accurate estimate. For instance, we still face material shortages due to Covid's impact. Along with this, weather plays a huge part in the ability to build in winter months and rain during the warm months. Collecting easements is another big part. Lastly, another big reason we cannot give people a timeline that would be accurate is the additional time constraint due to having to rebuild our co-op's electric distribution system in certain parts. This reconstruction is necessary for our fiber infrastructure," Kurtis explained.

The fiber internet build-out continues in Calhoun, with the co-op continuing to build infrastructure in Batchtown. The co-op regularly shares updates on the construction through the Calhoun Fiber Facebook page. Once the multi-year construction project is complete, approximately 421 miles of fiber optic cable will be ran in Calhoun. To learn more about the project and sign-up, call 1-800-468-4732 or visit calhounfiber.com.