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Clinton County selected to test new broadband technology

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Writer: [Katherine Foran](#)

A small town in northwestern Missouri is one of seven communities in the nation testing experimental technology that could expand rural access to high-speed internet and the opportunities that can bring.

Missouri University of Science and Technology is leading a team that has been awarded a one-year, \$300,000 grant through the

technology nonprofit US Ignite's [Project OVERCOME](#).

Through the grant, a wireless network will be deployed in the town, which is in Clinton County about 45 miles northeast of Kansas City. Researchers will use a technology, called RF Over Fiber, in which multiple low-bandwidth radio frequency (RF) devices are digitally stitched together to simulate a high-bandwidth device. The technology can provide high-speed internet access to areas lacking a fiber broadband infrastructure, said Casey Canfield, assistant professor of engineering management and systems engineering at Missouri S&T and lead investigator in the broadband project.

For more information about the project, see [Missouri S&T broadband research wins national contract](#) (Missouri S&T news release).

"This a great project for Clinton County and for communities around the country where access to high-speed connectivity is not available due to the cost of that 'last mile' of fiber, which would make it prohibitive for the consumer," said Joe Lear, University of Missouri Extension northwest regional director. "The project allows us to evaluate an experimental method that may possibly bridge that last mile at a reasonable cost."

The Project OVERCOME collaboration will test the technology's potential to reduce costs, expand broadband access to underserved communities and attract public and private investment. Partners include researchers from Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts, United Electric Cooperative, Maximize Northwest Missouri and MU Extension.

The partnership grew out of the work of the UM System Broadband Initiative, which convened in 2019 to address the lack of high-speed internet in many parts of Missouri by facilitating collaboration among the system's four universities and external partners

Missouri S&T partnered with MU Extension to find a community for the Project OVERCOME pilot. [Maximize Northwest Missouri](#), which works with leaders in an 18-county region to improve vitality and prosperity in communities, had already identified infrastructure for broadband internet access as essential to the region's economic success.

In a survey the group conducted last summer, 89% of respondents said high-speed internet was an important factor in choosing where to live, said Sarah Low, director of MU Extension's Exceed - Regional Economic and Entrepreneurial Development program.

Christel Gollnick, founder and president of JUPER Communications, said local leaders know that lack of access to reliable and affordable high-speed broadband is a roadblock to innovation, population retention and growth.

"Entrepreneurs, professionals working remotely and students of all ages need the internet," Gollnick said. "We need to do whatever we can to ensure equitable access in our rural areas. Maximize NWMO and The Clinton County Initiative are ready to help the Project OVERCOME team find a broadband solution that will improve the quality of life, education, health and economic vitality of communities."

As an example of what expanded broadband access can bring to the area, Low notes that while technical assistance for small businesses is available through the Small Business Development Center, the nearest office is in Kansas City. "What if you could jump on Zoom to talk with SBDC counselors?" she said. "What if you could move back to Clinton County but continue to sell your goods or conduct your business from there? Bringing money in from outside the community and outside Missouri is what will help grow our economy."

A partnership with local 4-H will help families learn how to use computers and explore online resources available within the community.

"If successful, this approach can be disseminated and replicated by other rural co-ops and municipalities around the country," said Sam Tennant, UM System Broadband Initiative manager.

For more information about the initiative, see [UM Broadband Initiative: Connecting and empowering communities](#) (MU Extension news release).

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