

# Group helps to link developers, technology

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Economic development leaders in a 13-county region of central Michigan have put together a system they hope will show industrial and commercial developers where they can find everything they need.

"We wanted more than just a plan," said Carolyn Bridges Bennett, director of promotions and workforce development for the Middle Michigan Development Corp. "We wanted to make it deliverable."

The project began with a

state grant to look at the availability of broadband telecommunications in the area.

Bennett said that project, called Link Michigan, gradually grew into a more comprehensive planning tool.

Broadband communications has become essential as a business tool. Companies expect to be able to move large electronic files, including data sets, images, video and sound quickly and efficiently from one location to another.

"There are a number of entrepreneurs in this area," Bennett said. "If they can't

send or receive a file, forget it."

That's a challenge in a rural area, Bennett said.

It's expensive for a telecommunications company to install fiber optic connections that carry the data quickly and efficiently.

Fiber-optic cables are spun glass fibers covered with a protective plastic coating, and carry digital data encoded into rapid pulses of laser light.

It's more cost-effective for telecommunications providers to lay a mile of cable in areas where that mile contains many potential customers than in

areas, such as mid-Michigan, where there might only be a few.

But spurred on by schools and higher education needs, broadband is available in many places in mid-Michigan. Improving technology makes it available in even more places.

"Verizon uses copper-only in this community," she said. Digital subscriber lines provide high-speed Internet connections — as long as the connections are close to a telephone central office.

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## Broadband

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Cable television also provides high-speed connections in some places. So do wireless links over microwave frequencies.

Bennett said the Link Michigan study turned up numerous places where there is "dark fiber," or optical cable that was laid in anticipation of a need, but the need never has materialized.

The 13-county group, calling itself the Heart of Michigan Planning Group, put together maps that indicate where high-speed connections are available or possible.

But, Bennett said, the group took it a step further.

In conjunction with Eastern Michigan University's Institute for Geo-Spatial Research, the group has developed interactive maps that show not only where high-speed Internet is available, but other infrastructure.

Simple clicks on the Java-driven map at the group's web site can show waterways, highways, roads, railroads and other items necessary to promote development. It can help to indicate the best spots to build industrial parks, commercial development or retail development, Bennett said.

"How much more advanced we get is up to each individual county," Bennett said.

She plans a presentation on the project to the Isabella County Council of Governments on Thursday.

Member counties of Heart of Michigan Planning Group are Arenac, Clare, Gladwin, Gratiot, Iosco, Isabella, Mecosta, Missaukee, Montcalm, Ogemaw, Osceola, Roscommon, and Wexford counties. Consumers Energy Corp. and the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe also are members.

The group's web site is at [www.heartofmi.org](http://www.heartofmi.org)