



Gov doesn't recommend state pay for internet upgrades

Posted: January 17, 2018 6:14 p.m.

By NATHAN BROWN
nbrown@postregister.com

The people who run the high-speed internet network that connects many of Idaho's universities, research institutions and Idaho National Laboratory want to expand their network's capacity, but the governor is not recommending the state pay for it as hoped.

"For the past 10 years we have consistently met the needs of our charter associates, the colleges and universities and Idaho National Laboratory, but we're at a point where the 10-gigabyte statewide system may not be sufficient to handle the kind of data that educators and researchers would like to move through the network," said Brian Whitlock, who is president and CEO of the [Idaho Regional Optical Network](#).

The Idaho Hospital Association, which Whitlock also heads, was one of IRON's founding members in 2007. Last year, state lawmakers voted to approve \$90 million in bonds to build two new INL buildings in Idaho Falls, a cybersecurity building and a building to house a new supercomputer for scientific simulation and modeling. As part of this, Whitlock said, INL committed to put in several million dollars' worth of infrastructure to enable IRON members to access the new capabilities.

Last fall the state Board of Education signed off on a recommendation that the state provide \$800,000 so IRON could upgrade from a 10-gigabyte to a 100-gigabyte system. This would help to maintain INL's investment in its upgrades, Whitlock said, and cover the portion of the network upgrade cost that IRON's members would have to pay otherwise, said state Board of Education spokesman Mike Keckler.

"In essence, we're moving from a garden hose and moving a stream of water through a garden hose to a fire hose," Whitlock said.

However, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, who is asking for millions in new spending on the state's colleges and universities this year, didn't include this in his recommended 2018-2019 budget. Marilyn Whitney, Otter's deputy chief of staff who oversees education issues, said Otter has "been very supportive of IRON since its inception," but he had to rank the higher education system's needs when deciding how to spend a limited amount of money.

"The governor prioritized the Higher Ed Task Force recommendations in his recommendations," Whitney said, referring to a state task force that studied higher education issues last year.

Whitlock said he suspected the reason Otter didn't recommend funding the IRON upgrades was that it had to compete with other statewide priorities. However, he said Otter has been generally

supportive of what IRON does, quoting from a section of Otter's State of the State address where the governor heralded INL's cybersecurity work, including the new Cybercore Integration Center.

"So we are reaching a critical mass of infrastructure," Otter said in his speech. "All that's needed is our continuing commitment for Idaho to remain on the vanguard of this evolving discipline."

The network, Whitlock said, has statewide benefits for workforce development and education by connecting the state's universities to each other and to institutions such as INL. A researcher doing modeling and simulation from Boise, for example, could access INL's supercomputer in Idaho Falls and run an experiment without having to worry about running into problems or losing their work due to a slow internet connection.

"That's the value with having extreme high-speed capabilities and being able to move large amounts of data," he said.

Whitlock said he hopes, in the future, IRON will make it easier for university students to work on projects with students at other universities and also test them on INL's system.

"It creates the talent pipeline for a future workforce for very good-paying jobs in a field that's only going to increase in its demand," he said. "By increasing the ecosystem and having a network that links them together, we will be able to create that talent pipeline in Idaho rather than having to go to other states."

As well as INL and schools such as Boise State University, Idaho State University, the University of Idaho, Brigham Young University-Idaho and Lewis-Clark State College, IRON also includes Washington State University, Idaho's high schools and some of its community colleges. (The College of Eastern Idaho isn't one of them, said spokesman Todd Wightman.) The city of Ammon is something of a "junior member," said Bruce Patterson, the city's technology director — IRON contracts with Ammon to host one of its nodes and uses Ammon's cables to make its local connections.

"It's a good partnership because they're a nonprofit," Patterson said. "The city and IRON get along very well, and part of their objective is to improve the education network."

The Legislature's budget-setting committee is [scheduled to hear the colleges and universities budget](#) next week. Whitlock said it remains to be seen what will happen if the state doesn't fund the upgrades.

"Candidly it's a cart and a horse," he said. "The Idaho National Laboratory has to make the capital investments for which this \$800,000 will be used to maintain and operate those investments. So that's a strategic investment for the National Laboratory to answer. If the money to maintain the system and operate the system is not there, would the INL still make the capital investment?"

Reporter Nathan Brown can be reached at 208-542-6757.