

Broadband coalition seeks development authority support

BY CATHERINE LACKNER

Directors of Miami's Downtown Development Authority were asked last week to "invest in digital inclusion" in hopes it will boost the local economy and create opportunities for everyone from school children to the elderly.

About 30% of Miami-Dade residents have no Internet access, said Kim Romaner, executive director of the Miami-Dade Broadband Coalition. This places the jobless at a disadvantage in employment searches, creates stumbling blocks for students doing research and homework, and deprives the elderly of important information and support, she said.

The non-profit coalition's goal is to provide more people with a broadband connection inexpensively. According to a statement by the group, the project would create more than 1,150 immediate high-paying jobs directly and 575 indirect jobs. The estimated economic impact is projected to be more than \$1 billion.

The project's funding comes from federal stimulus money, grants from Florida Power &

Light and the Knight Foundation, subscriptions, memberships and contributions.

"It takes an eco-system to solve this problem," Ms. Romaner said. But having a more fully connected community, she said, "builds a globally competent workforce and is a business attractor that will be an example around the country."

"In order to have this, you need fiber-optics, and they are everywhere," observed board member Alan Ojeda. "What is the next step?"

"Pricing is an issue," Ms. Romaner said. "In this county, we can't even think about things like this because we're so blindered by budget."

"It's expensive," agreed Alyce Robertson, the authority's executive director.

But the two major broadband providers, Comcast and AT&T, may agree to offer the coalition the same rates that Miami-Dade County enjoys, thereby reducing cost.

The downtown authority's Economic Development Committee agreed to study the matter and report back to the board with a recommendation.