

The [Tulalip Tribes](#) are stepping into the telecom business with an effort to use federal stimulus funds to bring high-speed internet to other tribal areas and rural communities in Snohomish, Whatcom and Skagit counties.

The Tulalips, whose reservation spans 22,000 acres west of Marysville, recently connected their broadband network to a Seattle-based exchange that gave them a cheaper and faster internet connection. Now the Tulalips, working with Seattle-based technology firm [Cascadeo](#), have created a nonprofit cooperative and applied for \$12 million in federal stimulus money to push that network into remote parts of the state that have been beyond the reach of broadband.

In doing so, the Tulalips, known for their stunning casino along Interstate 5, are positioning themselves to be a major telecom hub for northwest Washington. Such a project could have broad implications for rural economic development in the state, allowing for web-based businesses, videoconferencing and other technologies that have become common in most metropolitan areas.

“We want to be that hub and we’ve got the facilities and capabilities to do it,” said Greg Keith, assistant director of Tulalip Data Services, who helped draft the tribes’ application for the federal stimulus funds.

The network could eventually connect communities that have largely been ignored by cable or telecommunications companies, a major consideration of a report released in July by Gov. Chris Gregoire’s [Broadband Advisory Council](#). The report said the state “should actively support broadband proposals that effectively and demonstrably target ‘recognized’ unserved or underserved geographic areas of the state.”

The [Washington State Rural Broadband Cooperative](#) — founded by the Tulalips and Cascadeo — is trying to deliver on that mission. The nonprofit group expects to hear by November if its proposal wins a small portion of the \$7 billion broadband stimulus program. If those federal funds are received, the nonprofit could start connecting “anchor institutions” such as schools, libraries and tribal centers next year.

Ophir Ronen, a principal at Cascadeo, said the fiber-optic network could “level the playing field” in the communities by providing broadband connections at unusually fast speeds — a jump he likened to going from Fred Flintstone’s foot-powered car to the Starship Enterprise.

Ronen said the typical home in a metropolitan area has an internet connection at 5 to 10 megabits per second. The Rural Broadband project envisions deploying fiber-optic lines to “community anchor points” such as libraries, school and chambers of commerce, providing an ethernet cable connection of 1 gigabit per second and wireless internet of up to 54 megabits per second, Ronen said. A second phase envisions extending fiber to people’s homes and businesses with speeds of 1 gigabit per second.

The project has already won support from various groups in the region, ranging from the Mount Baker School District to the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office.

In a letter of support, Whatcom County Sheriff Bill Elfo said the network could enhance public safety systems. For example, it could allow the office to connect to state and national crime databases or retrieve vehicle licensing information.

"We believe that making broadband available in the Foothills area will provide our community, and many others like it, with the infrastructure, systems and services needed to address this serious lack of broadband connectivity," Elfo wrote. "This low cost solution may be the only realistic option we have available and comports with our increased use of satellite technology."

Key to the success of the Broadband Cooperative is the Tulalip Tribes, which last October established a link from the reservation to the Westin Building, a Seattle internet hub. By connecting to the Westin, which is home to a wide array of internet service providers, the Tulalips got access to cheaper internet connectivity. The Tulalips also established direct connections to companies such as Google and Microsoft, that are hooked up to the Westin, allowing for data to be transferred more quickly and cheaply.

The Tulalip extension — a nonprofit operating under the name Internet Exchange Northwest Washington or IX-NWWA — makes the Tulalip reservation a central access point for internet connectivity. It provides the reservation — and those in surrounding areas that tie into the network — with the same level of connectivity as what's offered through the Westin Building. And it does so at a cost of about \$4,000 per month.

Small communities would require fiber optic lines to connect to the Tulalip-based exchange, which are costly to install. However, Ronen said Black Rock Cable, which has a footprint in parts of Snohomish, Whatcom and Skagit counties, has available "dark fiber" — or fiber that's not being used — that could be tapped for the project.

As the hub grows, each new entrant would join the cooperative as a member, and take on some of the cost on pro-rated basis. The Tulalips also hope to sell their own tribal broadband services — including cable television, internet and telephone services — to the newly connected communities (other companies could sell broadband services on the network as well).

"It is a model. The technical expertise is there. There's no reason why the Tulalips can't provide those services," said state Rep. John McCoy, the public face of the Tulalips whose legislative district includes the reservation. "If we can bring a robust broadband network into rural areas, it leads to economic development."