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Tower an asset to students

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OLD FORGE — A microwave tower will help Old Forge School High School students reach new heights.

The borough Zoning Board recently approved the district's request to build the tower near the high school, zoning and code enforcement officer Paul Papi said.

The 100-foot tower will expand the district's Internet capability as part of a wide-area computer network with other school districts, colleges and universities. Construction is expected to be finished by mid-June, said Superintendent Gene Camoni, Ed.D.

The district originally had concerns about installing a tower because of safety and aesthetic worries. And despite earlier perceptions that a fiber-optic installation, or land line, would cost more, it was determined the land line just wouldn't work as well.

"Some (districts' connections to the network) had to be a microwave tower," Dr. Camoni said. "Old Forge had to be that way because of where it sat in a kind of a gully and because we're at the end of the line from the nearest hub. With a fiber (optic) installation, at this point, there would have been a degradation of signal."

The district will pay about \$2,500 a month to be part of the network along with more than 30 other school districts. The high-speed network is designed to give the districts faster access to the Internet and access to Internet2, which is a private network that more than 200 universities share for research and information. Intermediate Units 18, 19 and 20, which cover 10 counties in Northeastern Pennsylvania, formed the network. The network received a \$2.6 million state grant for three years of operation.

Conterra Ultra Broadband, which handles wireless towers for Verizon, will build the tower near the school's cafeteria loading dock, Dr. Camoni said.

"It will be on a 9-by-9 slab of concrete anchored below ground and surrounded by a 6-foot fence; and, of course, the district will have proper signs posted for no trespassing," Dr. Camoni said. "We had safety concerns addressed for all areas, including a study done of the ground."

The Zoning Board approved the tower as "a special exception for an extension of a nonconforming use," he said.

"We already have Internet service here; however, we need to expand upon that," Dr. Camoni said, explaining the ruling. "The capability is not sufficient to meet future needs. Also, the school was here before they changed the code."

He said the grant was not only for network installation but for teachers to create online coursework and for online training of faculty, as well as technical equipment for video conferencing and distance learning. Dr. Camoni said private businesses also may get in on the network's high-speed capability.

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