Scenic Regional receiving 400 devices

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Scenic Regional Library recently received its largest programming grant to help bring internet access to more of the area with 400 new devices.

Using money received from the American Rescue Plan Act, the library district was awarded a $248,498 grant from the Federal Communications Commission's Emergency Connectivity Fund. According to the library district, that will provide 300 Lenovo 100e LTE Chromebook laptop computers, all Wi-Fi enabled, along with 100 Wi-Fi hot spots.

It also will pay for internet service for the machines until next summer.

The machines provide internet access anywhere T-Mobile cellular service is available, Library Director Steve Campbell said.

"We have a lot of our patrons in rural areas," he said. "Either there are affordabilty issues or other reasons they don't have access to broadband. For some families, it's a game changer."

The laptops also will be crucial, Campbell said.

"A lot of people don't have computers," he said. "This is going to remove a huge barrier."

The grant brings the total number of Scenic

Steven Campbell

Regional's hot spots for loan to 175, including the 75 it received last year. The stimulus money also includes $27,000 in reimbursements for service for the 75 hot spots the district already had going back to July 1, 2021.

The 75 hot spots the library district had in the past year were checked out 1,293 times between July 2020 and June 2021, according to Scenic Regional's annual report.

"They've been very popular," Campbell said.

The hot spots can be ordered at any of Scenic Regional's nine branches as well as the Washington Public Library and delivered to the branch from the Union administration office, Campbell said. Since Washington has more than 30 of its own hot spots, it's unclear how much demand will come from there.

With the grant, Scenic Regional will expand its checkout period for Chromebooks and hot spots to six months from the current two weeks once the equipment goes into service in the coming weeks.

"We found people want them longer because they use them for a full semester of college or for work," Campbell said.

Unlike many federal grants, this one does not require the library to match any of the funds received.

Although the library district plans to continue to pay for service for the 75 hot spots it previously received, funding for the additional computers and hot spots is scheduled to only run through June 2022. Campbell said Scenic Regional will need up to another $108,000 annually to fund internet service for the 400 devices.

"We'll have to see how much money we have next year and also what kind of demand they have," Campbell said.

Each Chromebook costs the library $20 per month to connect to Wi-Fi, and the hot spots cost $30, according to Scenic Regional.

The only grant Campbell knows of that was larger than this one is a federal construction grant Scenic Regional used to build its now-former Union branch in the 1990s, Campbell said.