

GREAT BEND BECOMES A SMART COMMUNITY

Nex-Tech offers more than internet

BY SUSAN THACKER

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Friday Otuya, a community engagement specialist at Nex-Tech, visited the Great Bend City Council in January and again in February to announce that Great Bend is officially recognized as a Smart Rural Community.

At the Feb. 17 meeting, he presented Mayor Alan Moeder with a certificate of recognition and a sign for the city to post. The sign lets people entering the city know that Great Bend is a Smart Rural Community, served by Nex-Tech (www.smartruralcommunity.org). That means the city is connected by fiber broadband, which is resilient, reliable, and future-proof, he explained. Great Bend's fiber internet can be a key attraction for investors and tourists.

Otuya sent greetings from Nex-Tech CEO/General Manager Jimmy Todd and the executive management team.

"When folks hear about Nex-Tech, they think, 'Oh, the internet company in town,' just like any other internet company. But we're kind of different," Otuya said.

For starters, Nex-Tech



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Mayor Alan Moeder, left, accepts a sign and a certificate of appreciation from Friday Otuya, representing Nex-Tech, on Feb. 17.

is a cooperative, just like Midwest Energy or Sunflower Co-op, run by a board of directors, an executive management team and about 300 employees, many based here in Great Bend. It started in the 1950s when farmers in northwest Kansas could not get world-class telephone service from the big telephone companies, he said. "And so the farmers came together and they started Rural Telephone, which today is called Nex-Tech. We serve more than 30,000 broadband customers across northwest Kansas, parts of Salina parts and Great Bend, too."

Today, Nex-Tech does much more than provide internet service. "We are expanding fiber broadband to a bunch of places in rural

Kansas," he said. "We are serving critical institutions: fire department, police departments, libraries, hospitals – you name it. We are out there trying to connect these people to world-class fiber broadband, not just any kind of internet."

"We also have other services that extend beyond fiber," Nex-Tech serves homes and businesses, as well as tech companies within and outside Kansas, offering creative services, carrier services and community engagement.

Otuya's work in community engagement, supporting stakeholders in the communities Nex-Tech services with resources and partnerships. He said he has a good relationship with the Great Bend Economic Develop-

ment Team and the Great Bend Chamber of Commerce team.

Revolving loan fund

"I also administer a couple of loans and grants," he continued. "Many, many years ago, we partnered with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to say, 'How can we help people who want to start businesses or expand their businesses in rural northwest Kansas?' We started a Revolving Loan Fund. Its goal is to create jobs and promote economic development."

He said he hopes in the next year or two he'll be

able to work with either the GBED office or any other stakeholder in Great Bend to fund a project that meets the criteria.

Youth programs

Nex-Tech was instrumental in starting a nonprofit called Next Generation Roundup for Youth.

"Recently, we brought this into the Great Bend school district. We basically partner with the school district to offer internships," he continued. The goal is to help students gain skills that they will be able to use right here after they graduate, instead of

moving to Wichita, Kansas City, or out of the state.

"We're active in Great Bend and the county," he said. This summer, the program will offer 300 internship positions to young people throughout the state.

Finally, the Smart Rural Community Program and the signpost Nex-Tech provided signals a partnership with the city that could draw new business to Great Bend, Otuya said. It is a way to say, "This is what Great Bend has. Great Bend is not just a small town; we have world class fiber internet here. ... It's the gold standard for connectivity."

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