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Bristol Virginia Utilities Launches New Business Unit, Announces First Customer

BRISTOL, Va. – Bristol Virginia Utilities, a pioneer in the municipal telecommunications arena, has officially introduced BVU FOCUS – a business unit offering advanced IT consulting, operations and management services to municipal entities globally.

Created as a division of BVU OptiNet, FOCUS stands for Finding Opportunities for Communities Throughout the United States.

At its Aug. 16 meeting, the BVU Board of Directors voted to accept BVU FOCUS' first customer, MI-Connection, a cable and Internet company located north of Charlotte, N.C. The network is locally owned by the towns of Mooresville and Davidson, with additional subscribers from the nearby town of Cornelius also contributing to the customer base.

Members of town boards for Davidson, Mooresville and an unincorporated section of Mecklenburg County voted earlier this week to approve a five-year contract with BVU FOCUS to manage the cable and Internet system for the towns. The MI-Connection service area is the second region in the state of North Carolina to have a government-owned telecommunications system.

The desire of town leaders to raise the quality of customer service in North Carolina's Lake Norman area was a major reason MI-Connection chose BVU FOCUS. A recent recipient of the the 2007 Cornerstone Award for Outstanding Customer Service, BVU operates a highly responsive, customer-driven network that has managed to more than double its market penetration share in Bristol, Va. – from 30 percent to 65 percent – since 2004.

“This is an exciting and busy period in the history of BVU,” says company President and CEO Wes Rosenbalm. “We are proud to have developed the expertise in the area of fiber-optic broadband technology and all the operational processes that come with it during the past several years as we have ramped up our OptiNet division.

“During this time, we have been contacted by numerous municipal entities from across the country, especially in the past 18 months,” Rosenbalm added. “We have even been contacted by leaders from Europe and Australia who have heard about our advanced technical capabilities. We have highly trained personnel who are excited about sharing what they know. We're now prepared to offer services at almost any level on a global basis.”

In 2003, BVU became the first municipal utility company in the nation to launch a fiber-to-the-user (FTTU) network offering the full triple-play of services, which includes Internet, telephone and cable TV. The company won a legal battle in Virginia in the late 1990s by overturning a state statute that prohibited municipalities from offering telecommunications services.

The idea of establishing a consulting division of OptiNet was introduced to the BVU Board of Directors earlier this year after the utility was inundated with requests for consulting assistance from other municipal entities across the country. The decision was made to market BVU FOCUS as a separate business unit, with its own logo and business plan.

“We began thinking how we could benefit the City of Bristol, as well as strengthen America’s broadband capabilities globally by simply helping other communities find workable solutions for deploying telecommunications and information services,” says Jim Rector, who chaired the BVU board during this critical period and is the current mayor of Bristol Virginia.

Cities are recognizing the long-term benefits of investing in a robust communications system. In addition to providing more cost-effective services, research shows a significant economic development incentive, with new jobs and enhanced business retention, higher salaries, enhanced spending, increased property values and greater educational achievement.

About Bristol Virginia Utilities

BVU has been providing electricity to its customers for the past 60 years. It also provides water, wastewater and fiber-optic service to Bristol, Va., and the surrounding area. The company currently serves 7,793 fiber-to-the-user customers through its OptiNet division and provides electric power to approximately 16,258 consumers in a 125-square-mile service area in Bristol, Va., and portions of Washington and Scott counties in Virginia and Sullivan County, Tenn. BVU has eight substations and approximately 577 miles of distribution lines and 29 miles of transmission lines.

The water system serves approximately 7,985 consumers in Bristol, Va., and sells bulk water to other water authorities. The wastewater system serves 7,733 consumers in Bristol, Va., and as the industries in the Bristol-Washington County Industrial Park. The wastewater treatment plant is located in Sullivan County and is jointly owned and operated with the City of Bristol Tennessee.

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