SPOTLIGHT

'Via-Net' joins UTPA, rural school districts

Special To The Monitor

EDINBURG — Valley Telephone Cooperative Inc. in Raymondville is working with the University of Texas-Pan American to provide "Distance Learning" for four rural South Texas school districts using fiber optic technology similar to the university's interactive video network with the UT System.

The system, called "Via-Net," will connect high schools in San Perlita, Raymondville, San Isidro and Mirando City with the university.

"One of the things Valley Telephone wants out of this is to have the ability to get course work from UT-Pan American out to some of the school districts," said Steve Copold, technology resources director.

"We're looking at concurrent enrollment for the students, but we're also looking at getting our coursework out to teachers who work in these districts, who simply can't get this far to take a class three times a week," he said.

"One of the big advantages of this is that with Mirando City and San Isidro, you're talking about schools that have senior classes of 10 or 12 kids," Copold said. "They cannot afford to hire specialized faculty to teach very specialized classes.

"We're going to operate this around available time on our system," he said.

There will be no cost to the university, Copold said. Valley Telephone Co-op will donate the fiber optic line from their Raymondville office to the school districts and will place a multi-point CODEC — a signal translator — in Raymondville.

"Unlike our system, which is point to point, theirs will be point to multipoint," he said. "Any one of the school districts will be able to talk to the multi-point CODEC and go out to all other site simultaneously.

"All of their remote sites will see only the teaching site, but the teaching site will be able to hear all of the remote sites and see them, one at a time," he said.

"It keys on the audio. Whoever talks, that's the picture seen at the teaching site.

"In the curricular sense, this is really cutting edge technology that we're working with," Copold said.

The Region One Education Service Center also will be able to do career development for school district staff and required training for the Boards of Directors from the university site.