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West Virginia's Broadband Renaissance



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Robert Hinton is Chairman of the West Virginia Broadband Enhancement Council, a state organization dedicated to enhancing broadband internet access and opportunity across the state. He is also Executive Director of the Upshur County Development Authority and serves as a board member for several organizations, including the West Virginia Economic Development Council and the Buckhannon-Upshur Chamber of Commerce.

The future of broadband in West Virginia is brighter than ever and the state is poised for tremendous growth in connectivity. In a short amount of time, our “all hands on deck” approach has led to many successes, and there are several more on the horizon. This renaissance began in 2015 with a very critical piece of legislation, West Virginia Senate Bill 488, the passage of which created the West Virginia Broadband Enhancement Council (BEC).

Concurrently, U.S. Senator Shelley Moore Capito (R-WVa.) launched the Capito Connect program at the federal level. It wasn't until September of 2016 when the BEC members were appointed and its very first meeting was held. In furtherance of the mission, the Legislature

introduced HB 3093 during the 2017 regular session, a comprehensive broadband policy that expanded the responsibilities of the BEC, authorized the formation of cooperatives and created the Broadband Loan Insurance Program. The Legislature has continued to advance additional broadband policy, developing a ripe environment for broadband infrastructure expansion, along with establishing policies that encourage competition, discourage monopolies and enhance the business environment for internet service providers within the state of West Virginia.

Requiring more than a “top down approach,” successful broadband expansion statewide will rely heavily on grassroots, community-championed projects. The BEC developed a series of educational workshops to engage local leaders, economic development professionals and service providers to demystify this critical but complicated infrastructure. As a result, an eruption of dialogue about broadband began to take place within communities across West Virginia, something that had never occurred before.

Working closely with West Virginia Governor Jim Justice, the BEC advocated for the ability to utilize Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program funds for broadband planning and infrastructure development. With the approval from Governor Justice, the West Virginia Development Office (WVDO) launched the CDBG Broadband Grant Program in 2017 with strong demand from community leaders searching for financial resources. Through two funding cycles in 2018 and 2019, approximately \$4 million in CDBG funding has been dedicated to broadband planning and infrastructure projects, with more than half of West Virginia's 55 counties actively pursuing broadband development, including:



Photo Caption West Virginia Broadband Enhancement Council Chairman Robert Hinton speaks during Facebook's groundbreaking ceremony held in Beckley, West Virginia.

- **Planning Projects:** 16 projects including 37 counties, and
- **Infrastructure Projects:** Six projects that will provide broadband connectivity to more than 2,000 residential and business customers upon completion.

In the third and most recent funding cycle, communities throughout West Virginia have submitted 19 project applications, representing 15 infrastructure projects and four planning projects, requesting a total of \$9 million in project funds.

Notably, seven of the state's 11 Regional Planning Councils are represented in these project applications, which are expected to be announced in 2020.

Providing financial assistance for technical resources was a major driver for establishing the CDBG to prepare communities to be poised for federal funding programs. Federal agencies have continued to increase the amount of funding available for rural broadband infrastructure expansion, and West Virginia must ensure that our communities and providers of service are prepared to capture those funds. Combining this model with the efforts of our federal delegation is paying dividends today and will continue to do so with an ongoing focus.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development team partnered with the BEC to conduct a series of workshops in 2018 and 2019 to detail program requirements and encourage the development of USDA project proposals from West Virginia. Training events focused on three primary USDA broadband programs:

- Community Connect
- Distance Learning and Telemedicine
- ReConnect

Proving that communities and service providers in West Virginia can successfully compete for this funding, this emphasis on broadband development has resulted in project applications recently selected for USDA Community Connect funding, detailed above in Chart A.

CHART A 2017-2019 USDA Community Connect Projects in West Virginia		
PROVIDER	AWARD	COUNTIES
Central West Virginia Development Association, Micrologic	\$3 million	Barbour, Randolph, Upshur
Preston County Economic Development Authority, Digital Connections	\$3 million	Preston
ClearFiber	\$1.96 million	Marion, Monongalia

CHART B 2018 Connect America Fund Phase II (CAF II) Projects in West Virginia		
PROVIDER	AWARD	COUNTIES
Citynet	\$6.5 million	Greenbrier, Nicholas, Pocahontas, Taylor and Webster
Hardy Telecommunications	\$47,435	Rio, Hampshire County
ViaSat, Inc.	\$5.43 million	Various locations; emphasis in Calhoun, Clay, Marshall and Wetzel

In December 2018, the USDA announced details regarding its \$600 million ReConnect Program. Five proposals representing \$45 million in broadband infrastructure investment were submitted to the program, with \$25 million requested for grant-only funding and nearly \$20 million requested for grant-loan combinations. ReConnect announcements are expected to be completed by the end of December 2019.

In August 2018, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced its award of \$1.49 billion, to be paid over the next 10 years, to 103 providers nationwide under the Connect America Fund Phase II (CAFII) program. Three services providers were collectively awarded nearly \$12 million for broadband projects in West Virginia. See Chart B for the list of announced projects.

Additional funding opportunities are found with the U.S. Economic Development Administration and the Appalachian

Regional Commission. As West Virginia looks toward the future, we must be prepared to capitalize on the 2020 funding projected to be available, which will include an additional \$500 million through the USDA ReConnect Program and planned investment by the FCC, totaling approximately \$20 billion over the next 10 years. The sheer size of these programs are drastic game changers for West Virginia's connected future and, ultimately, the development of our state.

The BEC has long maintained that more accurate broadband data is essential. In 2018, West Virginia joined seven other states selected by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to partner in the National Broadband Availability Map (NBAM) initiative. This initiative is intended to determine ways to improve the accuracy of broadband mapping across the nation. Through this partnership, West Virginia is collaborating

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with NTIA and other states in the development of innovative data collection and mapping techniques. The NBAM is a secure GIS (geographic information system) platform for the visualization and comparison of federal, state and commercially available data sets.

In addition to public funding, West Virginia has attracted multiple private infrastructure investments – a key indicator of a business-friendly environment. Such investments are critical, considering our state lacks adequate open access long haul fiber networks, limiting our ability with backhaul and competitive connectivity transport costs.

In March 2019, Facebook announced plans to build, through its subsidiary Middle Mile Infrastructure, an approximately 275-mile long haul fiber route directly through West Virginia. A celebratory groundbreaking ceremony was held in November 2019, noting that West Virginia was the site of Facebook's first

groundbreaking event in North America. The excitement surrounding this project is fueled by the shared mission to improve connectivity in unserved and underserved rural communities.

Upon completion – projected for early 2021 – West Virginia communities will have direct access to long haul open access dark fiber, connecting communities and providers to a major internet exchange in Ashburn, Virginia. In addition to the Facebook fiber network build, global network solutions provider Zayo has a 400-mile long haul fiber route planned through North Central West Virginia, projected to be completed in 2021. These two private investments provide foundational support to spur additional middle mile and last mile deployment by reducing the costs of operations for service providers throughout the state.

West Virginia leaders recognize that broadband connectivity must be part of the state's overall economic development strategy. While significant challenges remain, the “all hands on deck” approach is working to improve connectivity throughout West Virginia. It is very exciting to see the gaining momentum, and that is why we must keep our foot on the accelerator and capitalize on every opportunity. Closing the digital divide is within reach. The future is a connected West Virginia. 