



Bowles Rice  
**VIEWS & VISIONS**

---

[BOWLESRICE.COM](http://BOWLESRICE.COM)

SPRING/SUMMER 2021

# Projects Closing the Digital Divide in West Virginia



## Robbie Morris

WV Broadband  
Enhancement Council

Robbie Morris is Chairman of the West Virginia Broadband Enhancement Council, which represents diverse users of broadband, including residential and business users, from locations throughout the state. Morris is also Chairman of the Robert C. Byrd Corridor H Highway Authority and the Executive Director of the Randolph County Development Authority.

**West Virginians have known for years that broadband expansion is critical for the future growth and success of the state. This fact has been brought to the forefront more than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic. Infrastructure that was already struggling to keep up with the demands of customers became stressed like never before when school, medical appointments and daily trips to the office were all forced to occur online. Fortunately, many positive steps had been taken in the recent past to close the digital divide in West Virginia, and more are on the way.**

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, significant progress has been made towards broadband expansion in the state, with much more on tap for 2021. The “all hands on deck” approach that was identified by former broadband council chairman Rob Hinton has continued to yield positive results for West Virginia. Through the leadership of Governor Jim Justice, the West Virginia Legislature, our congressional delegation, the Broadband Enhancement Council and many others, West Virginia has been able to secure hundreds of millions of dollars in public and private capital for broadband expansion projects.

In December 2020, the Federal Communications Commission announced the tentative results of their “Rural Digital Opportunity Fund” Auction 904 (RDOF). This reverse auction resulted in nine internet service providers (ISPs) tentatively receiving \$362 million to bring service to over 119,000 locations throughout the state. Based on bids submitted during the auction, 91 percent of those locations will receive gigabit service delivered by fiber to the premises. If all companies fulfill their RDOF obligations, this will significantly propel West Virginia in the right direction.

Partnerships between ISPs, government agencies and non-profits continue to be strong and successful throughout the Mountain State. Since 2017, West Virginia has secured



\$50 million, not including RDOF, in funding from federal sources. Local governments, regional planning and development councils, economic development authorities, non-profits and internet service providers are joining together to plan and construct projects throughout the state. Examples include Appalachian Regional Commission “POWER” funding awarded to Thundercloud (Cabell County), USDA “Community Connect” funding awarded to the Hampshire County Commission (Hampshire County) and USDA ReConnect funding awarded to Citynet (Doddrige, Barbour, Randolph and Webster Counties), just to name a few. These are the projects that will bring and improve service to many West Virginians sooner rather than later.

Another bright spot in West Virginia is the implementation of electric utility middle-mile projects. Under legislation passed in 2019, Appalachian Power/Wheeling Power and MonPower began assessing the feasibility of constructing open access middle-mile fiber in a similar manner as the rural electrification programs of the 1930s and 1940s. This legislation has resulted in a project from Appalachian Power Company (APCo)



for Mingo and Logan Counties and a project from MonPower for Roane, Calhoun, Gilmer, Braxton, Clay, Nicholas, Webster, Pocahontas, Randolph and Barbour Counties.

The APCo project will create approximately 400 new fiber miles while utilizing 200 existing miles of fiber; the MonPower project will create approximately 430 new fiber miles and utilize approximately 45 existing miles of fiber. Portions of fiber built by the utility companies will be available for lease by ISPs to connect customers via “last mile” fiber to the premises. These projects hold great potential for rapidly expanding middle-mile infrastructure throughout the state. Both projects have been approved by the Broadband Enhancement Council and the companies are now working with ISPs and the West Virginia Public Service Commission to make the proposed projects reality.

Finally, construction has begun on two “first mile” long-haul fiber projects in West Virginia. Zayo is currently working on construction of an approximate 400-mile long-haul fiber run through the state, and Middle Mile Infrastructure, a subsidiary of Facebook, has started construction on approximately 275 miles of long-haul fiber. These projects represent the first long-haul fiber runs in West Virginia. The new long-haul fiber will support investments in middle-mile fiber that is needed to bring quality broadband to customers.

While 2020 brought broadband issues in West Virginia to the forefront more than ever before, we have a multitude of reasons to be optimistic about our digital future. By working together, we have several projects under construction and several more that will be under construction in the coming year. The digital divide in West Virginia, while still too wide, is rapidly closing. That is something for which we can all be proud. **V**

