

Broadband Infrastructure Expansion

*RFP for Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal
Recovery Funds*

Buncombe County Government

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Application Form

Question Group

Buncombe County requests proposals for projects to help the community recover from and respond to COVID-19 and its negative economic impacts.

Buncombe County has been awarded \$50,733,290 in Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (Recovery Funding), as part of the American Rescue Plan Act. This infusion of federal resources is intended to help turn the tide on the pandemic, address its economic fallout, and lay the foundation for a strong and equitable recovery.

Buncombe County is committed to investing these funds in projects that:

- Align to county strategic plan and community priorities
- Support equitable outcomes for most impacted populations
- Leverage and align with other governmental funding sources
- Make best use of this one-time infusion of resources
- Have a lasting impact

Proposals shall be submitted in accordance with the terms and conditions of this RFP and any addenda issued hereto.

[Click here for the full terms and conditions of the RFP](#)

Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds*

Name of Project.

Broadband Infrastructure Expansion

Amount of Funds Requested*

\$4,000,000.00

Recovery Fund Eligible Category*

Please select one:

Broadband infrastructure

Brief Project Description*

Provide a short summary of your proposed project.

Buncombe County seeks funding to facilitate the expansion of high-speed internet in southeastern Buncombe County (e.g., Fairview, Garren Creek, Broad River). This funding will be used in addition to private provider funds as a match for the North Carolina Department of Information Technology's GREAT Grant program. It is anticipated that legislation (HB947) will allow Buncombe County to apply for up to \$4M in

RFP for Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery

funding and utilize American Rescue Plans for matching. This project will produce high-quality, future-proof infrastructure to serve this region for decades. Specifically, the project will align with Treasury guidance and meet the immediate needs of unserved and underserved households and businesses, by focusing on projects that deliver a physical broadband connection and last mile-connections. This project will lead to approximately 2,600 households and 6,700 individuals receiving Fiber-to-the-Home infrastructure in an area with limited high speed broadband infrastructure.

Project Plan*

Explain how the project will be structured and implemented, including timeframe.

Project Selection:

The Buncombe Broadband Workgroup issued an RFP and evaluated provider responses to determine compliance with RFP requirements. The RFP defined technical requirements regarding speed, latency, and technical sustainability. The RFP was scored by the workgroup and a provider was selected.

Project Approval:

Buncombe County staff will request approval of the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners for a contract with the selected provider in September 2021. This timeframe is subject to change based on the evolving legislative landscape. Currently, numerous North Carolina General Assembly Bills are under consideration to allow Counties to utilize American Rescue Plan funds for broadband infrastructure (e.g., SB689 - County Broadband Authority), or to provide other sources of funding (e.g., HB947 - GREAT Grant).

Project Implementation:

The project will be administered and constructed by the selected provider. The timeframe for this project is two years from project award.

Project Evaluation:

The project will include performance metrics for number of users impacted (e.g., parcels with access, number of subscribers).

Statement of Need*

Describe the need that this project will address. Include data to demonstrate the need, and cite the source of the data.

High-speed Internet is inconsistently available across Buncombe County. Based on work performed by the Buncombe Broadband Workgroup, Buncombe County estimates that of the total population, at least 35,000 addresses and 15,000 parcels are underserved with broadband infrastructure. Unserved populations suffer from a lack of internet infrastructure (e.g., fiber), costly internet access subscription prices, and outdated technology that does not provide the speeds necessary to perform basic educational, employment and telehealth -related tasks. To address this need, in December 2020, Buncombe County issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for High-Speed Internet Services (available here).

This project will lead to 2,866 living units and approximately 6,700 individuals (based on 2010 Census data) receiving Fiber-to-the-Home infrastructure in an unserved area with no high-speed broadband infrastructure. Users in the area will have access to speeds of at least 100 X 100 mbps, which will allow users to perform basic daily functions necessary for educational, employment, and telehealth -related tasks. These technology speeds align with Treasury guidance, as well as the requirement for the funds to be utilized in

unserved or underserved areas. The unserved and underserved areas have been identified using publicly available data from the FCC, NCDIT, and through additional analysis by the Broadband workgroup.

According to the ACS 5 Year Survey, the "Broad River" Census tracts have a 19% poverty rate (compared to 11% county-wide), only 19% of households have a computer (compared to 87% county-wide), and only 16% have an internet subscription (compared to 80% county-wide). These data points emphasize the significant benefits that broadband infrastructure could have in Broad River by providing an opportunity for internet access, increasing employment and training opportunities for those experiencing poverty, and limiting the impacts of the digital divide.

Link to COVID-19*

Identify a health or economic harm resulting from or exacerbated by the public health emergency, describe the nature and extent of that harm, and explain how the use of this funding would address such harm.

The COVID-19 public health emergency has underscored the importance of universally available, high-speed, reliable, and affordable broadband coverage as millions of Americans rely on the internet to participate in, among critical activities, remote school, healthcare, and work. Many Buncombe County residents were unable to complete normal daily activities related to education, employment, and telehealth – related tasks due to the impacts of COVID-19 and the subsequent closure of schools, employers, and some medical facilities. Broadband access is a critical need to all residents of Buncombe County and without such access, residents were disproportionately impacted by the risks of COVID-19.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) highlighted the growing necessity of broadband in daily lives through its analysis of NTIA Internet Use Survey data, noting that Americans turn to broadband internet access service for every facet of daily life including work, study, and healthcare. With increased use of technology for daily activities and the movement by many businesses and schools to operating remotely during the pandemic, broadband has become even more critical for people across the country to carry out their daily lives.

Recognizing the need for such connectivity, the ARPA provides funds to State, territorial, local, and Tribal governments to make necessary investments in broadband infrastructure. The guidance issued by the Department of Treasury for the American Rescue Plan specifically cites broadband infrastructure as an eligible use of the funding. Specifically, the guidance cites this use of funds, "Invest in water, sewer, and broadband infrastructure, making necessary investments to improve access to clean drinking water, support vital wastewater and stormwater infrastructure, and to expand access to broadband internet".

Population Served*

Define the population to be served by this project, including volume and demographic characteristics of those served.

This will serve the residents of southeastern Buncombe County. Below are demographics for the region based on the 2010 Census. These figures are subject to change based on the 2020 Census, which saw significant growth in Buncombe County and the region.

The "Broad River" region is rural and residents lack infrastructure present in other parts of Buncombe County. According to the ACS 5 Year Survey, the "Broad River" Census tracts have a 19% poverty rate (compared to 11% county-wide), only 19% of households have a computer (compared to 87% county-wide), and only 16% have an internet subscription (compared to 80% county-wide). These data points emphasize the significant benefits that broadband infrastructure could have in Broad River by providing an opportunity for internet access, increasing employment and training opportunities for those experiencing poverty, and limiting the impacts of the digital divide.

Results*

Describe the proposed impact of the project. List at least 3 performance measures that will be tracked and reported. If possible, include baselines and goals for each performance measure.

This project will provide fiber-to-the-home access for 3,000 parcels. Below are proposed performance measures.

Number of parcels with high-speed internet

Baseline: 0

Number of subscribers with access to high-speed internet

Baseline: 0

Percentage of parcels with access to internet speeds of 100 / 100

Baseline: 0%

Additional project impacts include the below. These data points are based on a broadband study by the State of Texas ([link](#)) and have not been extrapolated for this region. That said, it is anticipated that residents of Broad River will see similar impacts through access to telehealth and economic opportunities for training and small businesses as well as increased home valuations.

Broadband access for a household results in an increase of \$1,850 in annual economic benefit.

Home-based businesses and online sales result in \$2.4M annually (community of 20,000 population)

30% of tourism transactions are made online.

Teleworkers save an average of \$500 annually on care maintenance and fuel.

Small businesses using social media are 3x times more likely to have recently hired than not.

Telemedicine adds \$522K to rural economies and reduces hospitalizations.

Small businesses with websites have higher annual revenues than those that do not.

Broadband can increase home values by an average of 3%

Farmers with broadband see a 6% increase in revenue.

Evaluation*

Describe the data collection, analysis, and quality assurance measures you will use to assure ongoing, effective tracking of contract requirements and outcomes.

The selected provider will provide recurring status reports. Status reports will provide a summary of households served, subscribers, and technical performance (e.g., upload speed, download speed, latency).

Equity Impact*

How will this effort help build toward a just, equitable, and sustainable COVID-19 recovery? How are the root causes and/or disproportionate impacts of inequities addressed?

The provision of broadband infrastructure in Broad River will reduce the impacts of the digital divide. The digital divide refers to the gap between those able to benefit from the digital age and those who are not. The concern is that people without access to the Internet and other information and communication technologies will be disadvantaged, as they are unable or less able to obtain digital information, shop online, participate democratically, or learn skills and offer skills. An individual must be able to connect in order to achieve enhancement of social and cultural capital as well as achieve mass economic gains in productivity. According to the ACS 5 Year Survey, the "Broad River" Census tracts have a 19% poverty rate (compared to 11% county-wide), only 19% of households have a computer (compared to 87% county-wide), and only 16% have an internet subscription (compared to 80% county-wide). These data points emphasize the significant benefits that broadband infrastructure could have in Broad River by providing an opportunity for internet access, increasing employment and training opportunities for those experiencing poverty, and limiting the impacts of the digital divide.

Access to the internet in Broad River will allow school aged children to access educational materials and attend school remotely when required. Additionally, adults will be able to work from home, manage home-based businesses, and participate in online workforce training and education programs.

The digital divide also impacts children's ability to learn and grow in low-income school districts. Without Internet access, students are unable to cultivate necessary tech skills in order to understand today's dynamic economy.

Project Partners*

Identify any subcontractors you intend to use for the proposed scope of work. For each subcontractor listed, indicate:

- 1.) What products and/or services are to be supplied by that subcontractor and;
- 2.) What percentage of the overall scope of work that subcontractor will perform.

Also, list non-funded key partners critical to project.

This funding will be used with the selected provider. The provider will install and maintain broadband infrastructure including base, middle mile, and last mile fiber. The subcontractor will perform 100% of the work.

Capacity*

Describe the background, experience, and capabilities of your organization or department as it relates to capacity for delivering the proposed project and managing federal funds.

Buncombe County government will support the management of this project. The selected provider is a global supplier of telecommunications services and has committed resources to this project.

Budget*

Provide a detailed project budget including all proposed project revenues and expenditures, including explanations and methodology. For all revenue sources, list the funder and denote whether funds are confirmed or pending. For project expenses, denote all capital vs. operating costs, and reflect which specific expenses are proposed to be funded with one-time Buncombe County Recovery Funds.

Download a copy of the budget form [HERE](#). Complete the form, and upload it using the button below.

Recovery Funds - Broadband Budget.xlsx

Special Considerations*

Provide any other information that might assist the County in its selection.

This project supports Buncombe 2025 goals for educated and capable community, resident well-being, vibrant economy, and equity. This infrastructure will enable residents to access educational material and employment training resources, telehealth services, and enable operation of home-based businesses and work from home opportunities. Providing access to broadband can impact the goals of improving college and career readiness, increasing third grade literacy, increasing the median household income, and increasing total employment in the region's targeted industries.

The need for the internet starts while children are in school – necessary for matters such as school portal access, homework submission, and assignment research. A few data points:

Federal Communication Commission's Broadband Task Force notes that 70% of teachers give students homework that demand access to broadband.

Even more, approximately 65% of young scholars use the Internet at home to complete assignments as well as connect with teachers and other students via discussion boards and shared files.

A recent study indicates that practically 50% of students say that they are unable to finish their homework due to an inability to either connect to the Internet or in some cases, find a computer.

This has led to a new revelation: 42% of students say they received a lower grade because of this disadvantage.

Finally, according to research conducted by the Center for American Progress, "if the United States were able to close the educational achievement gaps between native-born white children and black and Hispanic children, the U.S. economy would be 5.8 percent—or nearly \$2.3 trillion—larger in 2050".

File Attachment Summary

Applicant File Uploads

- Recovery Funds - Broadband Budget.xlsx

List expenses here			\$	-		
			Total	\$	10,500,000.00	