

Regional Broadband Partnership (RBP)

OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission
AUGUST 2020

HISTORY

On December 31, 2019 the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) became aware of a new infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus, COVID-19, in China. The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The virus begins to spread throughout the U.S. in March, 2020. By mid-March, many states including Virginia, had instituted “stay-at-home” direction, recommended remote work practices and limited gatherings in both private and public spaces. In May, 2020 many states began lifting a limited number of the social distancing directives, but while both new cases and death related COVID-19 cases continue to rise. The coronavirus began in the US in more populated cities and regions but is now increasing in more rural areas of America. As of May 28, 2020, there had been documented 1,721,926 cases and 101,621 deaths in the US. Health officials cannot determine how long it will take to create and administer a vaccine to combat the virus. It is widely accepted by Health officials and offered by Harvard scientists that social distancing may occur into 2022.

Social distancing has increased the demand on high speed internet reliance for families, businesses, healthcare and education. Remote work practices for non-essential workers require access to both broadband services and high-tech software applications. Zoom, an online virtual meeting software application has grown from 10,000,000 meeting participants before January 1, 2020 to 300,000,000 participants by April 23, 2020. Foot traffic to non-grocery retail stores declined more than 97% during the last two weeks of March. Online sales of companies such as Amazon have grown 35% over the same time period last year. K-12 and higher education schools began to close in March transitioning to on-line classes. To preserve much needed hospital space for coronavirus patients and to adhere to social distancing guidelines, healthcare eliminated non-emergency procedures and turned to on-line visits and prescriptions. One of the hardest hit industries, restaurants, moved to delivery and curbside service only assisted through on-line ordering application. As restrictions are minimized, many social distancing practices will remain in effect for many months to come.

Families, businesses, children and individuals without access to adequate internet and/or those without the equipment and skills to optimize internet use, will be left behind during a time when even the most advantaged may be struggling to adapt to the new ways of commerce, education, work production and healthcare. Elderly persons, especially in rural areas, are disadvantaged experiencing lack of broadband infrastructure, lack of equipment and devices and lack of experience and training in using required equipment and software access.

The need of expanded broadband in many areas of the US, but predominately in the rural areas is not new and is not caused by the changes due to COVID-19. The need is only magnified during this time and during this change in culture.

The Federal Communication Commission estimates that in 2020, as many as 500,000 living in rural Virginia do not have broadband access in their homes. Virginia officials estimate this number at 600,000. This number does not include the number of businesses in rural Virginia without broadband access. A recent study by the Region 9 GO Virginia Council, Rural Entrepreneurship Action Plan, April 30, 2020, found the need for rural entrepreneurship in our region to link ecosystems in areas of broadband, affordable housing and COVID-19 response and recovery.

Identified needs and push to expand coverage within and among the counties of our region has been ongoing for several years. Recently counties have created broadband authorities, have invested in varying types of internet technology and coverage and have partnered with private and cooperative entities to expand coverage. Local governments have applied and been awarded state and federal moneys for expansion projects and have heavily lobbied the General Assembly for additional funding for expanding coverage. While in a positive direction, this has been slow at best.

RBP Overview

In May, 2020, the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission (TJPDC) identified that improved broadband accessibility is a focus of all localities of the planning district, whether directly or indirectly. While the TJPDC has been working with local governments individually, with the General Assembly and state officials for statewide changes, and assisting regional cooperatives with new broadband planning ventures, the TJPDC has never formally pursued an organized regional facilitation and convening effort. At the May TJPDC Commission meeting, commissioners asked staff to create a framework of what that effort would entail.

The Commission determined that internet accessibility should also be considered as a regional issue. The Commission saw several opportunities for improving the communication, coordination, and collaboration between both the six localities and the multiple primary stakeholders in broadband demand and supply; businesses, non-profit agencies, K-12 school, technical colleges and higher education, local, government, emergency management, healthcare, cooperative utilities, private communication providers, IT application providers, and state officials.

In May of 2020, the TJPDC co-chaired an Economic Infrastructure Committee of the Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce's Project Rebound. Broadband was identified as a priority growth area toward restoring business operations during and post COVID-19. Other committees included; Small Business, Arts and Creative Economy, Hospitality & Tourism, Key Industry Clusters, IT-Financial-Defense, Biotech-Manufacturing-Food & Beverage, Anchor Institutions, and Non-profit. A copy of the full recommendations of Project Rebound will become part of this framework.

The Charlottesville Area Alliance (working toward an age-friendly community) has identified improved internet availability and use as a priority in its five year action plan. Adequate broadband coverage and training to use is necessary for all ages in the areas housing, transportation, social inclusion and healthcare.

Because of the identified historical needs of expanded broadband accessibility in the region and the more urgent crisis needs due to COVID-19, the staff of the TJPDC in agreement with the Commission, recommend the immediate exploration of a Regional Broadband Partnership to facilitate a regional organized effort to expand both broadband accessibility and information technology services and to facilitate broad stakeholder groups for immediate and longer-term support of these efforts.

Purpose:

The Regional Broadband Partnership (RBP) is an information and advisory board, created by the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission, in partnership with multi-sector stakeholders related to needed services of high-speed internet supply, demand and use. Composed of an overarching consortium of information technology interests, the Partnership will enhance regional coordination and effectiveness.

Objectives:

The primary objective of the RBP is to be a united voice to inform and advocate for all stakeholders through leadership, knowledge sharing and common understanding of the current and future needs of high-speed broadband internet services in the region.

Immediate Services

Convening
Facilitating
Information Sharing
Existing Data and Reports
Collaboration
Inclusion of Broadband into regional planning efforts of housing, economic development, health, aging, transportation, etc.
State Advocacy

Potential Future Services

Mapping
Data
Public Outreach / Surveying
Technical Assistance & Training
Capacity Building
Planning
Grant writing
Regional Authority

Function:

The RBP will be an advisory board that generates research on broadband-related issues and makes recommendations to local government and regional stakeholders. The Partnership will address the high-speed internet needs of the Thomas Jefferson Planning District's region, with a focus on expanded connectivity, affordability and technical use of applications. TJPDC staff on behalf of the RHP will initially:

- Provide a meeting space and coordination;
- Take meeting minutes;
- Prepare meeting packets;
- Coordinate studies and analysis for Partnership consideration;
- Develop and gather data and report on local and regional broadband accessibility measures;
- Facilitate continued communication, cooperation, and coordination on broadband matters; and,

- Forward all recommendations to RBP members, member organizations, and other appropriate entities;
- Monitor and report on state and federal broadband issues and initiatives.
- Propose an annual TJPDC budget for RBP support and activities.

Each locality will maintain its existing structure for addressing internet-related issues. The RBP partnership will focus on macro-related issues, such as policies, infrastructure funding opportunities, information sharing and coordination/partnerships between stakeholders and state advocacy.

Funding:

As this is a regional effort, the TJPDC will staff the RBP from its current staff funded through local and regional per capita contributions. To accommodate this effort at this time, assistance to individual jurisdictions will be diminished to provide support to the RBP. While convening, facilitating, compiling materials, drafting, organizing, and reporting is covered by the TJPDC staff member, additional studies, services and special project development will require additional or alternate funding sources.

Composition:

The composition of the RBP includes stakeholders from the public, private, nonprofit, and citizen sectors in the City of Charlottesville, Albemarle County, Greene County, Nelson County, Fluvanna County, and Louisa County. The composition may change with time as the Partners meet and identify other relevant stakeholders. Initially, the RBP will include one representative from each organization unless noted otherwise. The roster includes Partners and Stakeholders. There shall initially be no voting members. The TJPDC Assistant Executive Director shall act as Chair for meetings and agenda setting. In their absence, the Chair shall appoint a temporary replacement.

Members

Partners: Partner Membership in the Partnership will be open to the public for as broad an input range as possible. Key stakeholders will be solicited to join and other interested parties will submit requests to join. It is estimated that this group will meet between two and four times per year.

Advisory Panel: The Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission will appoint an Advisory Panel. This group of cross jurisdiction and cross sector of public and private stakeholders will guide the work and direction of the staff within available time and resource constraints. The Advisory Panel will advise and make recommendations to the TJPDC, local governments and IT sector businesses on broadband and technology issues that are regional in nature. This group will meet between 6 and 12 times per year.

- City of Charlottesville Elected or Planning Commission Official (1)
- Albemarle County Elected or Planning Commission Official (1)
- Fluvanna County Elected or Planning Commission Official (1)
- Greene County Elected or Planning Commission Official (1)
- Louisa County Elected or Planning Commission Official (1)
- Nelson County Elected or Planning Commission Official (1)
- Public School Systems (6)
- CNE Staff Representative (1)
- Charlottesville Regional Chamber Staff or Business Member (1)
- *Ting Representative (1)*
- *Firefly Representative (1)*
- *AT&T Representative (1)*
- *Comcast Representative (1)*
- *Dominion Power Representative (1)*
- *Century Link Representative (1)*
- *SCS / AcelaNet Broadband (1)*
- *Verizon Internet (1)*
- TJPDC Appointed Citizen/Resident Representative (Urban) (1)
- TJPDC Appointed Citizen/Resident Representative (Rural) (1)
- University of Virginia (UVA) (1)
- Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission Commissioner (1)
- Piedmont Virginia Community College (1)
- Virginia Department of Housing & Community Development (1)
- *Region Ten Health District (1)*

RBP member may appoint an alternate to serve in their absence.

Exploratory Committee:

A group of identified regional internet leaders will be appointed by the TJPDC Executive Director to create an exploratory group to review and revise initial structure, function and goals of a regional Broadband Partnership. The exploratory group will help determine the need and direction of a Partnership. It is the Group's responsibility to provide a recommendation to the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission through the Executive Director.

Organizational Structure:

The RBP would consist of an Advisory Board that includes all members as listed and as revised by the Partnership.

Meeting schedule:

The RBP Advisory Panel will initially meet every other month.

The RBP Partners will initially meet quarterly until a schedule and work plan is established.

The Panel and Partners will determine meeting frequencies and schedules.

Deliverables/Strategies:

The RBP will act as an advisory body until such time as the mission is altered and resources to expand responsibilities are achieved. Documents and responsibilities include:

- **RHP Mission, Vision, and Goals:** This advisory board may develop a refined mission statement, vision, and goals.
- **Set the Work Scope:** The Advisory Panel will be responsible for synthesizing feedback from the Partners to form a scope of work for the RBP.
- **Assign Working Committees (as needed):** Should a focus group need to be formed, the Advisory Panel would be responsible for creating working committees and assigning members to the committees. The working committees would function as technical support groups with a stated purpose and goals.
- **Keep Communication Open:** The RBP will strive to make communication open and timely to facilitate strong collaboration between all stakeholders.
- **Coordinate Regional Broadband and IT Summits:** The Partnership would work to identify educational and advocacy topics of interest to design and implement IT summits on a given internet and technology-based topics and share through public summits.
- **Produce Annual Reporting:** The Partnership would develop a means to report on broadband related topics annually to all stakeholders.
- **Integrate Broadband into Decision-Making:** The RBP would work to integrate broadband considerations into planning efforts around the region. The Partnership would make recommendations to local planning efforts and projects.
- **Provide periodic reporting to TJPDC Commission:** Provide no less than twice a year reports of progress to the TJPDC Commission.

Timeline:

As there are immediate needs with identifying broadband strategies that will best meet the unmet communication needs, the RBP will be established as soon as possible. The following timeline sets an outline for establishing the RBP and resolving pending concerns, while planning for future opportunities.

A formal proposal will be submitted to the TJPDC in August, 2020. The TJPDC Assistant Executive Director will work with the Exploratory Committee to develop the recommended proposal and RBP Framework. Until a formal Partnership is established, the Exploratory Committee will work with TJPDC to pursue immediate broadband efforts. The first RBP Advisory Panel will meet in September, 2020. The first quarterly meeting of the RBP Partners will meet in October, 2020.

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