



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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BROADBAND PROJECT BOOSTING FAYETTE CONNECTIVITY

UNIONTOWN, PA - Fayette County will soon receive a major technology boost, thanks to COVID-19 relief funding. Fayette County Commissioners Dave Lohr, Chairman; Vince Vicites and Scott Dunn have awarded a Design Build Broadband Deployment contract to Vitalink LLC of Markleysburg, for installation of the necessary infrastructure to expand WiFi Internet capabilities countywide. The base bid contract, totaling \$5,375,540, requires all work to be completed by Dec. 15, 2020, and primarily focuses on identified broadband “hotspots” along the state Route 40 corridor.

The funding is Fayette County’s portion of the more than \$2 trillion economic relief package, known as the CARES Act, approved by the federal government earlier this year. “CARES” stands for Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security. Fayette County Chief Financial Consultant Sam Lynch said this new infrastructure project will have a major impact on citizens, businesses and visitors, making the internet more easily accessible to those in our many rural areas. “This project will be completed in sections. The key to this is that Vitalink will be paid section by section to complete the work,” Lynch said. “Each area must be completely finished and fully operational before they can move on to the next one. That way, we don’t lose any CARES Act funding when it expires at the end of the year for any sections that aren’t complete.” Lynch said the state Department of Community and Economic Development will regularly monitor the county’s progress through monthly reports and other requirements. McMillen Engineering of Uniontown is also providing oversight of the project.

According to Vitalink’s successful bid documents, crews will select a central location at each of the designated hotspots to maximize wireless signal. They will use existing buildings, poles and towers whenever possible to install wireless access points and antennas. New poles or towers will be installed when existing facilities are not available. Power may be provided through existing sources, newly installed service and solar power, where possible.

Commissioner Dunn said expanding rural broadband has always been important, in order to make Fayette County competitive in attracting new residents and businesses. “With the COVID crisis, this is even more evident as more people work remotely and kids are learning at home,” Dunn said. “The benefits from the economic and educational perspectives will be far reaching and allow us to grow in the future.” County tourism is another business sector that will greatly benefit from the broadband expansion, Dunn added. “I’ve long thought that our beautiful mountains, rivers and lakes can sell themselves with a little help from our visitors sharing pictures and posts on social media,” he said. Dunn said the CARES Act funding and shovel-

ready project are just the beginning of Fayette's broadband plans, as the county's Redevelopment Authority has already begun laying the groundwork for future expansion. "To be able to fund these projects without money from the coffers of the county is a benefit," Dunn said.

Commissioner Vicites said rural broadband expansion has been a top priority for Fayette County since 2016, with the commissioners regularly meeting with congressmen and other top Washington, D.C. officials, seeking support for the project. "Rural broadband is the infrastructure of the future," Vicites said. "Without this infrastructure in place, Fayette County will not be able to progress and compete with other Pennsylvania counties or other states." The CARES Act funding fulfills a need for all citizens and visitors, Vicites added. He thanked all those who have dedicated their time and energy to bringing this project to fruition. "Residents, schools, businesses, medical facilities and more all need broadband," he said. "With access to rural broadband, Fayette County will position itself for future growth and prosperity. This is just the start of our efforts to ensure our citizens and businesses are connected to each other - and the world at large."

Commissioner Lohr said the project has been "a long time coming," with the need for expanded internet access growing more pressing each day amid the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic. He said educators, students and business owners are feeling the effects of that need. "It's so exciting when a project you've been working on finally becomes a reality. When I start talking about improving infrastructure, many people just tune out, but infrastructure is more important than architecture; it's critical to our viability as a place to live and work," Lohr said. "Business can't compete without reliable infrastructure; improving it creates economic development, puts people to work and enhances local communities. Yes, we need roads, bridges, water and sewer lines, but we also need to make sure that all of Fayette County has access to broadband." Lohr said Fayette County is now "on the cutting edge" and "setting the standard" for rural broadband. He said projects of this nature require a collaborative effort between elected officials, legislators, utility companies and private industry; and extended many thanks to all involved with the process. "The benefits that come from faster broadband are economic, social and environmental. It's more than email, e-commerce and entertainment; it's also access to healthcare, banking and education," he said. "Ultimately, it's about improved communications."

Broadband hotspots included in the initial project are:

- Ohiopyle Borough Zone.
- Route 40 Zone (Main Street/Fayette Street intersection down Main Street to Northgate Highway).
- North Union Township Recreation Center.
- LaFayette School.
- East End Community Center.
- Former Army Reserve Center (Proposed Fayette County Prison on state Route 21).
- Uniontown Hospital.
- Bailey Park.
- Meadowbrook Ballfield.
- Hutchinson Ballfield North.
- Hutchinson Ballfield South.
- South Union Recreation Center (Township Drive).
- Lick Hollow Park (Route 40).
- Watering Trough (Route 40).

- Scenic Overlook (Route 40).
- Wharton Furnace Road.
- Wharton Furnace Chapel.
- Laurel Mountain Baptist Church.
- Wharton Park (state Route 381).
- Mountain Fellowship Center.
- Henry Clay Township Municipal Park.
- Kentuck Knob.
- Fallingwater.
- Mill Run.
- Jumonville Training Center.
- And mobilization efforts.

Additional expansion efforts, such as the state Route 51 corridor, are planned for future legs of the project. Lynch said completing this large portion of the project will help Fayette County more easily seek funding for those phases.

The broadband contract is part of the \$11,674,587 in total CARES Act funding Fayette County received. The funds must be used to address county needs specifically related to COVID-19.

Lynch said uses of some of the remaining funding include updating the county's IT equipment through Ford Business Machines for improved telework access; restructuring of several county departments for social distancing; reimbursement for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) purchased; and installation of temperature scanning units for county buildings.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.info.

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