



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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BROADBAND PROJECT RECEIVES CARES ACT FUNDING BOOST

Uniontown, PA – Fayette County’s connectivity initiatives will soon receive another major boost, thanks to a second round of federal funding.

Last month, the state Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) announced the awarding of more than \$3.7 million in additional CARES Act funding to help communities address challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. “CARES” stands for Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security.

“More than ever before, Pennsylvania’s communities are facing incredible challenges as they work to protect their residents and businesses from the devastating impacts of COVID-19,” said DCED Secretary Dennis Davin. “The four projects receiving funding today will create new opportunities for their municipalities by providing critical funding, access to sought-after resources and safe spaces for community use, as we continue to mitigate this global pandemic.”

The second round of funding was administered through DCED’s competitive Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program, with entities statewide vying for a portion.

The success of Fayette County’s ongoing Broadband Expansion Initiative earned the county the majority of the available funding, with more than \$1.5 million being awarded to the project. Fayette created the initiative to expand the fiber-optic backbone of the county’s broadband network, in order to provide immediate free high-speed broadband access to residents.

County Redevelopment Authority Executive Director Andrew French said Fayette was able to successfully acquire the funds due to the commitment of local CDBG funding by the county and Dunbar, Georges, German, Luzerne, Menallen and Redstone townships.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly caused both social and economic turmoil, both nationally and internationally. Based on a countywide needs assessment, it was confirmed that the lack of high-speed broadband access was one of the most critical issues affecting the county,” French said. “The inability of families to have adequate service negated their ability to tele-educate, telework or to receive telemedicine during the pandemic. Many low-income homeowners are not able to afford even the basic internet service that may be provided, and instead rely on their phones, which only provide limited service, at best.”

Fayette previously established a strategy utilizing \$5.3 million from its COVID-19 County Relief Block Grant Program to establish a line of broadband hotspots along the state Route 40 corridor. Phase I of the initiative was completed by Vitalink in December 2020.

As part of Phase II, the latest funds will help expand internet offerings from those central lines into more rural areas in the western portion of the county. Additional hotspots are planned for locations in the most populated communities.

Fayette County Commissioner Vince Vicites said the latest round of funding is “great news for our broadband opportunities.”

“The key is to continue applying for funding at each and every opportunity so that we may grow our broadband reach to all the homes and businesses affected by limited connectivity,” Vicites said. “Broadband will have a profound impact on Fayette County’s future. If we don’t establish it now, we’ll be at a competitive disadvantage with other counties, states and countries. We’re making tremendous progress.”

Commissioner Scott Dunn said future funding will continue to be made available in the form of competitive grants and loans, rather than direct payments to counties, as the first round of CARES Act monies were.

“Along with our grant writers, we will be sure to apply for these available funds,” Dunn said. “For Fayette County to remain competitive in the areas of business and education, continued expansion of broadband is a necessity.”

Commissioner Chairman Dave Lohr said the broadband project’s continued growth will improve county infrastructure and create more business opportunities.

“Having reliable infrastructure helps businesses be more competitive and generates economic development, enhancing local communities,” Lohr said. “We need to ensure all of Fayette County has access to broadband service, as it’s much more than just email and entertainment; it’s access to healthcare, banking and education. Ultimately, it’s about improving communications during a time when society is disconnected.”

French said Phase I revealed the estimated cost per broadband hotspot is approximately \$50,000, and the county and redevelopment authority have identified 54 locations throughout 24 communities where those connectivity hubs could be located when the project is complete.

“While the amount awarded in round two is less than the \$2.75 million we initially requested, the Commonwealth has additional funding through the same program that they will be announcing soon,” French said. “We will obviously continue applying for that funding to supplement our Fayette County Broadband Initiative.”

For more information about the latest grants, visit www.DCED.PA.gov.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.FayetteCountyPA.org.

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