



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 27, 2021

FAYETTE COUNTY MARKING BROADBAND PROJECT EXPANSION

Uniontown, PA – Fayette County officials celebrated their latest broadband infrastructure expansion with a ribbon cutting ceremony Wednesday morning.

Last year, county commissioners Dave Lohr, Chairman; Vince Vicites and Scott Dunn utilized a portion of the county's allotted CARES Act federal funding to expand WiFi Internet capabilities along the state Route 40 corridor. "CARES" stands for Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security.

The work, completed in December by Vitalink LLC of Markleysburg, was part of a Design Build Broadband Deployment contract focused on installing broadband "hotspots" countywide.

Since its completion, the project has had a major impact on citizens, businesses and visitors, by making the internet more easily accessible to those in our many rural areas. Signage is currently being installed countywide, designating the broadband hotspots.

Hosted by the Fayette Chamber of Commerce and Fayette County Board of Commissioners, the project ribbon cutting took place at the Canaan Church of the Brethren in Gibbon Glade. Local, state and federal legislators were represented during the event.

The once-remote church, located in a rural portion of Wharton Township, is now so well-connected that it attracts internet users from far and wide to its hotspot. One such user, Christal Burnsworth, spent several months making daily trips to the church, seeking connectivity.

"Our schooling has been greatly impacted by the pandemic," Burnsworth said. "We did several months of remote and virtual learning due to COVID."

Affectionately referred to as "Miss B" by her students at Kingwood Elementary School in Kingwood, W. Va., Burnsworth is a kindergarten teaching assistant who resides in Gibbon Glade. She is also an academic instructor for the school's After School Explorers Program (ASE), which has been virtual for the past year due to the pandemic.

"I didn't have reliable internet access at all, and I was told the county had put a hotspot in the Gibbon Glade area, at the church. Thanks to that, I was able to drive just a short distance to get reliable internet," Burnsworth said. "This allowed me to teach online and help students for a few hours in the evening. These were students who were falling behind due to the pandemic; really struggling with remote learning and needing the one-on-one interaction."

Burnsworth's success with the broadband hotspot eventually led her to contract with Vitalink LLC as her home internet provider.

"I can now teach from home with no issues, and the service has been stellar," she said. "I cannot thank the county and Vitalink enough for making it possible to reach out to students and help where the need was so great. I hope many others are enjoying it as much as my family has."

Commissioner Dunn said expanding Fayette County's broadband infrastructure is important for so much more than just the educational opportunities it creates for our students.

"Our outlying communities will be able to have the same opportunities as our urban centers, creating equality in education, business and residential development," Dunn said. "I pledge to continue to expand this infrastructure as money becomes available."

Commissioner Vicites said the ribbon cutting signifies that the county's initial efforts to expand its broadband infrastructure have become a reality.

"We spent our CARES Act money very effectively by expanding broadband, and now we're ready to take it to the next level in the future. Our ultimate goal is to offer connectivity to every household, school, medical facility and business that wants it," Vicites said. "This is the infrastructure of the future, and we don't want to miss that opportunity, because funding is finally available to complete these important upgrades across Fayette County."

Vicites said Fayette is already at the cusp of being much further ahead in its broadband development than other rural counties across Pennsylvania and nationwide.

"Our efforts as county commissioners have allowed us to seize this opportunity and position Fayette County for many economic development opportunities that haven't existed in the past," he said. "Not only are we laying the groundwork for new infrastructure, but we can increase the connectivity and speeds of existing broadband through deployment of this activity."

Commissioner Chairman Lohr said he's "excited beyond words" to see a project he's been working toward for "quite some time" come to fruition.

"While broadband access is something that so many people take for granted, here in Fayette County, there are vast regions with little or no access. The barriers that presents really came to the forefront through COVID, as people were needing to work or attend school remotely," Lohr said. "But how do you do that effectively when you don't have reliable broadband?"

Lohr said the project opened the door to future development and connectivity to even more industries, such as medical, psychological and social services, as well as churches.

"It also let our citizens stay connected with family and friends. Those living in outlying communities will have the access to goods and services that everyone with reliable broadband takes for granted," he said. "Although some of our more remote regions are attractive to companies looking to do business in Fayette County, no modern business entity is likely to come here without reliable broadband access. Development is good for those communities because with it comes job opportunities, as well as new residents and their families. When we increase our tax base, everyone benefits."

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

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This communication is part of the Fayette County PR Initiative, which is funded through the Fayette County Local Share Account (LSA) and Hotel Tax Grants in cooperation with the Fayette County Board of Commissioners, Fayette Chamber of Commerce, The Redevelopment Authority of the County of Fayette, The Redstone Foundation and other partners. This funding has been designated for the continued promotion and marketing of Fayette County, PA.

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