

TACIR Broadband Update

November 5, 2020

My name is Lisa Cope, and I am the General Manager and CEO of Ben Lomand Connect in McMinnville, TN. I am very thankful to be given the opportunity to submit comments to the committee on behalf of the Tennessee Broadband Association.

The Associations' members consist of several commercial and cooperative companies which provide broadband and other telephony services to individuals across the state. The Tennessee Broadband Association (TNBA) members are committed to serving subscribers in some of the most rural areas of the state, which are also some of the highest-cost locations to serve.

The Broadband Accessibility Act has helped tremendously in the efforts to serve unserved and critically underserved Tennesseans. The grant program established with the Act has been the impetus needed to firmly deploy solutions in areas that would not otherwise be feasible to serve.

Also, since the inception of the Broadband Accessibility Act, our members have found that it is much easier to partner with traditional and nontraditional friends throughout the state than ever before. Several of the communications companies have formed relationships and are partnering with electric cooperatives, municipalities and even one another. Electric partners are looking for trusted, experienced broadband providers and to work collaboratively to meet the needs of the residents in our state, and all are looking to achieve the scope and scale needed to increase efficiency for everyone. These partnerships have helped customers achieve connectivity with a fiber-to-the-premise solution today, and the knowledge and experience brought to the table has helped numerous electric providers evaluate the feasibility of deploying and providing service to customers in their footprint.

Other collaborations have been formed with city and county governmental entities searching to find the means to provide this service that can change the quality of life for their residents. And some of these situations are not partnerships in the traditional sense of the word. The relationship can be as basic as the city or county selecting a local provider which is vested in the region and entering a long-term agreement which will create sustainable revenue and make expansion plans possible. It can also be providing infrastructure and working with a partner to manage their network. The key is to find creative ways to make the fiber dream happen, and it may not always be the first conversation that arises. Just keep talking . . .

The ongoing broadband conversation has increased awareness about this vital infrastructure, but there is still work to do. Some individuals simply do not understand the benefits that can come along with broadband. There are so many applications - not the least of which is virtual learning. Someone mentioned to me that we will have students

that are missing part of their education, but I believe this situation may help create the brightest and most resilient, technically savvy learners to ever come through the educational system. The TNBA members are finding solutions to connect students. From offering service by partnering with local school systems (more nontraditional partners) to community Wi-Fi Hotspots, our group is working to help them continue learning.

Telemedicine and the ability to work from home have been especially beneficial during the pandemic, and the number of homes connected to fiber broadband has greatly increased. At Ben Lomand Connect, we have experienced a net increase of over 8% in subscribers since the beginning of 2020. This service is not a commodity, it is a necessity!

The Center for Business and Economic Research attributes rural counties in Tennessee with higher poverty, lower representation of college-aged residents, and higher unemployment. Having access to broadband is likely to improve economic outcomes for these areas as mentioned in An Economic Impact Study of a Broadband Expansion Project in Tennessee which has been compiled by Ferdinand DiFurio and Yolunda Nabors from Tennessee Tech and commissioned by the Tennessee communications cooperatives. The study further indicates that broadband and other technologies that advance information have been essential to advance economic prosperity over time. An approximate price tag of \$1.7 Billion has been suggested as the cost to deploy broadband to the remaining unserved locations in Tennessee. Even with a planned \$400 Million investment by the TNBA member companies, additional funds are needed to fully bridge the digital divide in Tennessee. For every dollar invested by the state, there are several additional dollars invested from other grant and loan programs and private investment. The Act is having the desired impact – please continue to fund this program that is so vital to the long-term economic viability of the state and the future of her residents.

Thank You!

Lisa Cope