

Henderson County
BROADBAND TASKFORCE: March 6, 2024

The Broadband Taskforce held a meeting on March 6th, at 6:00 p.m. at 1 Historic Courthouse Square.

Taskforce Member	Present	Absent
Commissioner Daniel Andreotta, Co-Chair	√	
Commissioner David Hill, Co-Chair	√	
David Davidson – Citizen		O
Jason Alfrey – Henderson County Public Schools		O
Sara Nichols – LOSRC	√	
Jimmy Brissie – Henderson County Emergency Management	√	
Johnny Duncan – Henderson County Sheriff's Office	√	

Also present: Chris Todd, Business & Community Development Director, and Lee Stevens, Planner III.

Commissioner Andreotta, Taskforce Co-Chair called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Public Comment:

Ms. Merriman of the Oleta Falls community near Dana spoke at the meeting regarding the difficulty of maintaining her and her husband's businesses from their home due to a lack of internet. They have to rent office spaces downtown in order to access the internet at all. Work, safety, and connection are her concerns. It is a basic utility now, like water or electricity. Her cell phone does not work in their home, so a landline is their only option for accessing emergency services. Telehealth is unavailable to her or her husband in their home.

Laurie Fisher of Hungry River HOA on River Ridge Rd spoke on behalf of many of her neighbors also present at the meeting. She explained that after the previous Broadband Taskforce meeting in February, she had her neighbors take the internet speed test to see how service performed, to learn that all of them failed the speed test. She and others in her neighborhood also have limited cell phone service and lack landlines, which is a safety issue.

Jeff Wickham spoke representing the River Ridge subdivision off Deep Gab Rd and described the difficulty of completing work tasks for his engineering job. His neighborhood has poor cell service coverage due to topography, and previous efforts to get internet access have been unsuccessful due to substandard service and a lack of options.

Christopher Cope at 401 Hungry River Rd addressed the lack of both internet and cell coverage in his neighborhood and the threat to public safety that posed. As a fire fighter, he understands the importance of accessing 911. He currently shares his landline with others in the neighborhood that do not have access to their own to ensure their safety.

Approval of Agenda and Minutes:

Mr. Brissie moved to approve the meeting summary from the February 7th, 2024, meeting. Motion passed.

Discussion:

After hearing public comment, the Taskforce discussed the upcoming cell tower near Mills River and the National Forest for its impact on cell coverage for the County.

Presentation: Completing Access to Broadband (CAB)

Lee Stevens, Planner III for Henderson County, presented on the CAB program. Per the Taskforce's request, Ms. Stevens showed the eligible areas for broadband connection alongside datasets illustrating public safety, cell phone service coverage, census data for school age children and income, and previous funding applications.

She also showed estimates of how far Henderson County's investment could go given the match requirements under CAB, and how many addresses could be reached.

The Taskforce discussed the \$900,000 in ARPA funds set aside for broadband funding, noting that the money needs to be encumbered by the end of the year. Mr. Todd further explained the County's options to either select a high-need area for priority connection through the CAB program, or for allowing providers to propose an efficient build-out, as it is more likely they would select an option with a high return on investment. Taskforce members asked questions about the State's matching commitment, and Ms. Nichols noted that the State is committed to match up to \$8 million to each county through CAB, with more funding opportunities still to follow once ARPA funds have been depleted. Mr. Tanck of Charter Communications, who attended the meeting, commented that providers are limited to a 30% match under CAB program rules, and that they would very likely commit more funds if the State legislature would allow it. Mr. Brissie asked Mr. Tanck if providers have the capacity to build out multiple projects at once given the required timelines. Mr. Tanck said yes, as they were putting a great deal of priority towards these projects. Mr. Tanck noted, too, that as more infrastructure was put in place, adding additional addresses for connection could be done more easily and more cheaply.

Next Meeting:

The Taskforce asked Staff to present the information on CAB at the next Board of Commissioners meeting on March 20th, 2024, at 9:30 AM at 1 Historic Courthouse Square. Commissioner Andreotta invited interested members of the public to attend that meeting and sign up to speak if they so wished.

Mr. Brissie motioned for the meeting to be adjourned, the motion passed, and the meeting adjourned at 6:59 PM.

Commissioner Daniel Andreotta, Co-Chair and Commissioner David Hill, Co-Chair
Henderson County Broadband Taskforce

*Anyone can request a copy of the meeting recording by contacting County staff.