

Henderson County
BROADBAND TASKFORCE: May 15, 2024

The Broadband Taskforce held a meeting on May 15th, 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		O

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:

Bruce Neidle of the Oleta Falls community near Dana spoke at the meeting, stating that he and his wife were shocked by the lack of internet service available to them after their move.

Scott Lictus of Pinnacle Falls – The Ridges neighborhood also spoke. He commented that many in his neighborhood have tried to switch to StarLink for broadband access, but for many this isn’t an option due to tree cover or lack of visibility to northern sky.

Brandon Melton, who is on the Board of Directors for the Oleta Falls community, spoke as well about the difficulties that come with little to no internet access. He commented on the safety and health issues this poses for older adults, but also said that there are now four school-age kids in the neighborhood who need access to the internet for school assignments.

Approval of Agenda and Minutes:

Commissioner Andreotta moved to approve the meeting summary from the March 6th, 2024, meeting. Motion passed.

Discussion:

After hearing public comment, the Taskforce discussed the process for CAB participation. Chris Todd explained that the Board of Commissioners voted to increase the amount of ARPA funding from \$900,000 to \$2.5 million, resulting in a total project cost of \$7,142,857.14 under current CAB matching rules.

Presentation: Completing Access to Broadband (CAB) Scope of Work

Lee Stevens, Planner III for Henderson County, presented on the Scope of Work required for participation in the CAB program. Ms. Stevens updated the Taskforce on the County’s commitment to NCDIT to provide \$2.5 million in matching funds, approved by the BOC at the March 20th, 2024 meeting. Per the CAB program rules, the next steps are to determine if the County will provide priority areas in the Scope of Work. Ms. Stevens showed the eligible areas for broadband connection alongside datasets illustrating public safety, cell phone service coverage, land use, census data for school age children, older adults, and income to help identify possible priority areas. She provided maps created by the Land of Sky Regional Council illustrating density of Broadband Serviceable Locations (BSLs) and how many eligible addresses could be reached with the committed project funds.

The Taskforce discussed the potential benefits and drawbacks of including priority areas in the Scope of Work, such as return on investment, pace of the project, and the number of proposals likely to be submitted. Taskforce

members also discussed how best to determine priority areas within the County. Commissioner Hill asked if we could partner with adjacent counties to provide broadband infrastructure along the county's edge. Ms. Nichols said that would be supported and a good way to increase the broadband footprint in harder to reach areas. Commissioner Hill asked how broadband impacts emergency response. Mr. Brissie said that the County's emergency service stations had broadband connections, but the larger issue for access is individual households without internet or cell service. Commissioner Andreotta noted that future broadband funding initiatives would use emergency services as a focus. The taskforce members discussed the wisdom of including non-contiguous areas for priority, and Ms. Nichols asserted that proposals were likely to include non-contiguous areas regardless of the priority area boundaries. The Taskforce also considered that more providers were likely to submit proposals for a larger project scope, increasing the likelihood of a competitive project. It was agreed that everyone in Henderson County deserves access to fast and reliable broadband, making every unserved location in the county a priority. Maps of the BSLs overlapping census block group data from the 2022 American Community Survey were used to consider if one side of the County should have higher priority than the other within the Scope of Work. Given the higher concentration of overlapping areas of lower household income and higher school age children on the east side of Highway 25, the Taskforce determined a higher need for that side of the county. It was noted that future programs could help fill in gaps of access still left after CAB concludes.

The Taskforce recommended including all eligible locations in the County in the Priority Areas for the Scope of Work, dividing them into two sections divided by Highway 25. The east side of the County was recommended to be the first priority given the higher concentration of overlapping census block groups that house high densities of school age children, lower median income households, and older adults. The west side of the County is recommended to be the second priority in the Scope of Work.

Next Meeting:

The Taskforce asked Staff to present the Taskforce's recommendation for priority areas to the Board of Commissioners on June 3rd, 2024, at 5:30 PM at 1 Historic Courthouse Square for approval to complete the Scope of Work with NCDIT.

Commissioner Andreotta motioned for the meeting to be adjourned, the motion passed, and the meeting adjourned at 7:20 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.