

BERRIEN COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
Broadband Internet Taskforce
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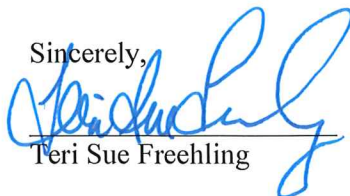
Applicant:

In the spring of 2022, the Berrien County Board of Commissioners (the “Board”) announced that it would make \$6,000,000 of county ARPA funds available to assist local communities in deploying broadband internet services to unserved residents. The Board directed the Berrien County Broadband Internet Taskforce (“BCBIT”) to develop a process for communities to apply for county ARPA funding for local broadband projects. The BCBIT prepared these application materials and instructed local communities to submit their funding requests to the BCBIT by the end of October, 2022. At that time, it was estimated that \$6,000,000 would be sufficient to satisfy most of the local broadband funding needs. However, the BCBIT has received applications from 18 local communities requesting a total of \$34,000,000 in ARPA assistance, far exceeding the amount of funds made available by the Board. If these requests were funded in whole, approximately 6,035 currently unserved parcels would receive broadband service.

While the local communities were preparing their ARPA applications, Berrien County hired DCS Technology Design to create a map of the county showing each parcel currently unserved by broadband. DCS concluded there were 11,539 unserved parcels in the county. Of these, 4,885 parcels are scheduled to receive broadband service through the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (“RDOF”) program, which provides federal funding to internet service providers (“ISPs”) to connect rural residents to broadband. Once all RDOF projects are complete, 6,474 parcels in the county will still be unserved, a portion of which are unoccupied and/or agricultural. This remainder aligns closely with the total number of parcels that would be served if all 18 local ARPA requests could be funded.

Since its formation, the goal of the BCBIT has been to promote the expansion of broadband services to all unserved residents of the county. With only \$6,000,000 available for local broadband projects, if the county chose to fund only a handful of the local requests, a considerable number of residents would remain unserved. Moreover, it is difficult to develop objective criteria to determine which of the \$34,000,000 in ARPA requests merit county assistance. Fortunately, in addition to RDOF, there are a number of state and federal programs becoming available that could help fund local broadband deployment. Berrien County and its local ISPs will be eligible for these programs and, in some cases, having local funds available to contribute to these programs could make our region more likely to receive this assistance. Therefore, the BCBIT recommends that Berrien County defer a decision on which local ARPA applications to fund, with the exception of the Oronoko and Bainbridge applications which were previously approved. Instead the County should leverage its \$6,000,000 APRA allocation, and other necessary administrative resources, to procure additional state and federal grants to cover the cost differential between what the County has available for local broadband deployment and what the true cost of county-wide deployment will likely be. To expedite this, the BCBIT further recommends the county retain the services of technical experts to create a pre-engineered Broadband Master Plan (based on the DCS data map) for the deployment of broadband services to all unserved parcels, to coordinate with local ISPs to estimate the cost and timing for implementing this Master Plan, and to assist the county and local ISPs in applying for state and federal funds necessary to implement the Master Plan.

Sincerely,


Teri Sue Freehling


Jim Curran


Ezra A. Scott