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TOP STORY

Berrien County

Berrien County secures federal funds for broadband internet access

Freehling on rural access: 'This will be our legacy'

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ST. JOSEPH — Nearly \$26 million in federal funding is on its way to Berrien County from the state to help provide access to high-speed internet in unserved rural areas.

That money will be supplemented by \$15.5 million from the internet provider who will install the underground lines, \$4.5 million from Berrien County and \$2.9 million from local municipalities to fund the roughly \$50 million project.

Berrien County Commissioner Teri Freehling announced the news to the Berrien County board during its Committee of the Whole meeting Thursday morning.

“This is fantastic news,” she said. “More than 5,000 unserved residents and businesses in rural areas will get access to high-speed internet.”

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and the Michigan High-Speed Internet Office (MIHI) announced \$203 million in the first round of Realizing Opportunity with Broadband Infrastructure Networks (ROBIN) grant awards to connect over 70,000 unserved Michigan homes and businesses to high-speed internet.

Freehling said the internet provider, who applied for the grant on behalf of Berrien County, is Midwest Energy & Communications. She said based on an agreement with that company, the MEC will provide \$15.5 million toward the project, which she said it will more than recover in the future through users’ internet bill payments.

Freehling chairs the Berrien County Broadband Internet Task Force (BC-BIT), which has worked for months to identify unserved addresses throughout the county, gather cost estimates, and choose an internet provider to work with that would submit the grant application.

She said 858 addresses in Berrien County were removed from the county’s proposal by MIHI, because they may be funded by another program. She said BC-BIT will continue to monitor those and, if necessary, work to find a way to fund them.

“We don’t want to see these 858 left behind,” she said.

According to a news release issued this week by the governor’s office and MIHI, 154 grant applications came in from 40 entities projecting \$2.3 billion in project costs and requesting \$1.3 billion in grant funding.

After reviewing and scoring each application, 24 projects from 11 applicants moved forward as first-round ROBIN grant recipients.

In total, the ROBIN program will provide \$238 million in federal funding to support the deployment of high-speed internet to more than 90,000 unserved locations through the state thanks to the U.S. Department of Treasury’s Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund, according to the news release.

Freehling said county, state and federal officials recognize a reliable internet connection is not a luxury, but a necessity for health care, education, employment, entertainment and more.

The MIHI office reports the consequences of being unconnected or under connected to the internet can be measured and studies have shown that:

Students with high-speed internet access have an overall grade point average of 3.18, while students without home access have a 2.81 GPA.

Increased access to the internet can help address issues of isolation among older adults.

Effective use of telemedicine can reduce hospitalizations of nursing home residents and reduce health care costs.

Small businesses that have websites have higher annual revenues and are more likely to have recently hired one or more employees than similar businesses that are not online. Those that use social media weekly are three times more likely to have hired recently than those that don't.

A study of manufacturers found that 40 percent said they were able to add new customers and 57 percent said they saved money because of their high-speed internet connection.

Farmers who gain high-speed internet access experience an average 6 percent increase in farm income.

Having a home broadband connection gives households an estimated economic impact of \$1,850 per year.

“Personally, I’m excited to know I will have connectivity,” said Freehling, who lives in the Baroda area. “I am paying \$120 a month for satellite internet. For my business, my home and my daughters for school, this could be life-changing.”

Freehling said she is thankful for BC-BIT’s work, and the support from the Berrien County board in approving its recommendations.

“This will be our legacy,” she said.

Berrien County Administrator Brian Dissette said there will be follow-up meetings with all local municipalities regarding construction schedules and other information.

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