

## **Broadwater County Broadband Advisory Board**

**Update 09/13/2023**

The Federal BEAD Program (Broadband Equity Access and Deployment) is making \$42 Billion dollars available nationwide to improve internet access with the goal of bringing fiber to everyone. Montana has been allocated \$628 Million dollars for this program – far short of what will be needed.

The Broadwater Broadband Advisory Board was created by the County Commissioner's to work with Internet Service Providers (ISP) and with the state Communications Advisory Council (CAC) to ensure that Broadwater County residents benefit from this program.

To date, Broadwater County is the only county to have formally created a Board to work with the ISPs and the CAC on the BEAD program. All of the ISPs we have had discussions with have lauded Broadwater County's initiative and have been very welcoming to our discussions.

We started out with a very nebulous path forward – the BEAD program is guided federally by NTIA (National Telecommunications and Information Administration) which laid out to the states minimal criteria for BEAD funding applicants. States have leeway to adapt their own implementation plans and criteria. The CAC continues to refine its conditions and program parameters and the broadband board is actively participating and attempting to be as proactive as possible in this process.

The Broadband Board immediately reached out to ISPs, industry organizations and the State CAC to stay on the forefront of the program and to contribute to the state planning process.

The Board met collectively and individually with Montana Opticom, Montana Internet, BroadbandMT, Triangle Communications, Three Rivers Communications and Vision Net to ask about their view of the BEAD program and any plans they have – especially any plans they might have regarding Broadwater County. We even met with staffers from Senator Tester's office. Connecting with out-of-state ISPs like Charter and Century Link/Lumen has been more difficult.

Various members of the Broadband Board have been attending the state CAC meetings. As the process has moved forward, more of the implementation details and options are becoming clearer. We have all made important connections with members of the committee and with industry personnel. Members of the Board and Commissioner Richtmyer have made many comments and recommendations to the CAC committee

regarding parameters and scoring criteria as well as to discuss the challenges and needs of rural communities as it relates to available service and the cost of BEAD program implementation.

One theme that has been made very clear by all of the ISPs, Industry Associations and the CAC is that partnerships will be key to higher rankings in the application process. It is a huge, complex and expensive endeavor. Counties, cities, and the ISPs need to partner to be successful. The CAC has even encouraged ISPs partnering together to reach the goal of bringing fiber to as many Montanans as possible.

The CAC has recently rolled out an Internet Speed Survey intended to collect data on the internet speed of locations. The intention of these tests will ultimately help us, the State Committee and the FCC get a more accurate understanding of the service available statewide, and will help us ensure the majority of Broadwater County is eligible for BEAD funding.

The Broadband Board created a “postcard” that will be distributed to students and businesses this week encouraging residents to take the Speed Survey test by September 22. We want to encourage as many residents as possible, especially outside the city limits, to take the speed survey.

BCDC (Broadwater County Development Corp.) pledged \$500 dollars to the Broadband Board to cover the expenses of this undertaking and they are providing the funding for the cost of printing the Internet Speed Survey postcards.

At this time, the only ISPs that have any plans to expand service in Broadwater County are Montana Opticom and Montana Internet Corporation. Montana Opticom was recently awarded [FILL IN PROGRAM DETAILS HERE/POLYGON INFO OR PLAN INFO](#). Montana Internet Corporation has traditionally funded their own projects and are in the early planning stages to possibly provide fiber in Broadwater County. While very welcoming and open to discussing the BEAD program and the ISP business as a whole, due to the regulatory nature of federal funding and the considerable building and continued operating costs, other companies are not interested in trying to build fiber in Broadwater County at present.

Collaborating with an ISP involves more than just endorsement. The County needs to bring something to the partnership.

The BEAD program requires the ISPs getting funding to do a 25% match (thereby extending the BEAD funds). However, unlike former programs, the BEAD program will accept “Soft” matches or in-kind matches rather than hard cash.



The Broadband Advisory Board recommends the County Commissioner's consider these in-kind matches as our part of any partnership:

- Waiving of fees for permits to cross county roads. The ISP(s) would still need to submit the permit requests, but the fee would be waived
- Allowing the ISP(s) to lay cable when the county is doing any trench work that would fit with the ISP routing. In addition, encourage other companies to allow the ISP to lay conduit and to inform the ISP(s) of trenching projects.
- Donate locations for the ISP(s) use for huts, towers or for creating a Customer Service hub in Broadwater County.
- Perhaps most importantly is engagement with an industry third-party consulting company to conduct a feasibility study and help the ISP(s) engineer and create viable projects as well as facilitate a multi-entity collaboration in order to score as high as possible in the BEAD application process. The ISP(s) that are interested in expanding in Broadwater County are small companies that do not have the same resources as companies like Charter/Spectrum and will need this type of support and collaboration from the county.

It is better to find ways to help our partners in this process than to stand aside and hope something good happens.