

Broadband in Buncombe- Connecting All Communities

RFP for Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

Land of Sky Regional Council

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Application Form

Question Group

Buncombe County requests proposals for projects to help the community recover from and respond to COVID-19 and its negative economic impacts.

Buncombe County has been awarded \$50,733,290 in Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (Recovery Funding), as part of the American Rescue Plan Act. This infusion of federal resources is intended to help turn the tide on the pandemic, address its economic fallout, and lay the foundation for a strong and equitable recovery.

Buncombe County is committed to investing these funds in projects that:

- Align to county strategic plan and community priorities
- Support equitable outcomes for most impacted populations
- Leverage and align with other governmental funding sources
- Make best use of this one-time infusion of resources
- Have a lasting impact

Proposals shall be submitted in accordance with the terms and conditions of this RFP and any addenda issued hereto.

[Click here for the full terms and conditions of the RFP](#)

Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds*

Name of Project.

Broadband in Buncombe- Connecting All Communities

Amount of Funds Requested*

\$1,945,000.00

Recovery Fund Eligible Category*

Please select one:

Broadband infrastructure

Brief Project Description*

Provide a short summary of your proposed project.

Broadband access and adoption have been identified by Buncombe County as a priority of the Board of Commissioners, staff, and community for the last several years. Through planning work of the Land of Sky Regional Council and Buncombe County, we have identified two distinct broadband-related problems the community faces- serving unserved areas, often these are rural areas where broadband infrastructure has not

been delivered and adoption for citizens that cannot afford the service. This project aims to help serve a known unserved/underserved area of the county, provide low-cost service WIFI to a high-density area in Asheville that would otherwise not be able to afford the service, and provide specialized digital inclusion training to identified targeted communities.

Project Plan*

Explain how the project will be structured and implemented, including timeframe.

This project has three connectivity components: 1) Access, 2) Affordability, 3) Digital Literacy. These three components make for a strong digital inclusion template to address the complexity of a broadband ecosystem.

1) Access- Small extensions

Land of Sky and Buncombe County have already identified unserved/underserved areas of Buncombe County. Through this process, we have identified small areas that may be hard to fund and serve unless strategic direction is centered on their deployment progress. Land of Sky will coordinate with project partners to identify locations in need of small extensions, with priority given to sites the school needs to be served or individuals with specialized needs. If a site is too far for a provider to extend without subsidy we will offer cost-sharing on extensions or alternative solutions. Initial planning for setting up the program will occur within 3-6 months of funding, and small projects will be awarded quickly. Once a provider partner is appropriately identified we will contract and work with the provider on deployment over the following 120 days.

2) Affordability- Public Housing

The affordability project will partner with Buncombe County and the Housing Authority to rank and prioritize phase 2 implementation of WIFI at facilities. In 2020 the Asheville Housing Authority worked with partners to implement a public WIFI project to address racial and economic equity issues through digital inclusion. Building on the success of this program we would like to continue this into additional sections of the public housing community. An RFP has been distributed, and we will work with the public housing to assure implementation and funding can support this project. Once an Internet Service Provider partner is identified we will work to provide new WIFI service as well as affordability packages to the customers in the remaining residential buildings in public housing (as many as 53), serving an estimated 800 residents over the following 3-6 months and citizens will be eligible for free EBB service if the provider is participating in that program.

3) Digital Literacy

The program seeks to implement a pilot digital inclusion training program with specific target populations being senior citizens, low-income, formerly incarcerated, and English as a second language. Land of Sky will work with partners to formulate a digital navigator program with agencies who work with these groups. LOS will help support with additional technology equipment, training, and outreach.

Statement of Need*

Describe the need that this project will address. Include data to demonstrate the need, and cite the source of the data.

Bringing connectivity to citizens who need it directly works to address equity issues and elevate the citizens in Buncombe County. Buncombe County leadership and citizens have been engaged on this issue for several years, but the necessity for broadband during the pandemic escalated the importance of connectivity for all. This essential service improves education delivery, emergency management communications,

telehealth services, socialization, and economic mobility. It is a basic need that impacts citizens in a multifaceted capacity.

In the 2019 Buncombe County Broadband survey facilitated by Land of Sky Regional Council, over 10% of survey responses said they did not have the internet at all. For these responses 47% said that costs were unaffordable, and 44% said services were not offered at their home. 52% responded that speeds didn't meet their needs. From this same survey, 61% said they needed internet to perform educational tasks, and nearly 50% said they telecommute to work. 92% said that broadband was considered an essential service. It is to be noted that this survey occurred pre-pandemic, and numbers are likely low compared to post- pandemic response.

The 2013-2017 American Community Survey Data shows a strong correlation between lack of access and BIPOC communities as well as individuals below the federal poverty line.

This project puts tools in the hands of people to live a more connected life.

Link to COVID-19*

Identify a health or economic harm resulting from or exacerbated by the public health emergency, describe the nature and extent of that harm, and explain how the use of this funding would address such harm.

Access and adoption of broadband were elevated during the COVID-19 pandemic. When dependency on the virtual world for many basic necessities such as education, telehealth, remote working, socialization, and shopping the need for broadband escalated. Students without connectivity were unable to function in virtual school and more likely to fall behind, this project increases connectivity for students by providing access to unserved populations. Medical providers were forced to transition into telehealth, and if individuals did not have access to broadband they struggled with basic healthcare during the pandemic. This project will increase participation in telehealth services by providing connectivity and training to individuals on telehealth resources. Many employers offered remote working to keep up their business, if citizens did not have access they may not have been able to keep or complete their work causing stress to both employer and employees. This project will support connectivity to citizens in the workforce while helping others re-enter the workforce. During the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health declined, largely connected to a loss of socialization we need in our community. Broadband access gives opportunities to connect with our friends and families to help improve socialization. This project will increase opportunities for socialization and give individuals access to mental health resources. Many places were closed down to traffic during the pandemic, this was hard both on the business owners and the citizens with the purchase of needed items. For people that were able to shop for goods and services online, they kept the economy and lifestyle running. This project supports the opportunity to access e-commerce activities. Increased connectivity would improve communications to the community in times of emergency, making resource sharing more effective and efficient.

Population Served*

Define the population to be served by this project, including volume and demographic characteristics of those served.

1) Small Extensions Access Program:

This program will target citizens where small extensions of service will help connect small pockets of homes. Ideal projects will be where infrastructure is close by, but without subsidy, they will not be completed. Individual sites will be selected based on their ability to serve with broadband, cost of project, and complexity of the project. Primary recipients will likely be in rural and suburban sections of the county. Land

of Sky will use information from FCC 477 data, Buncombe County data, Buncombe Schools, or other data available to Land of Sky Regional Council to identify households and solutions. Priority will be given to student access and others with specialized needs.

TBD- feet of fiber, coax, or other broadband delivery method
TBD, likely 50-80 - unserved addresses served

2) Affordability Program

Demographic information of public housing request- all residents of the housing coalition are considered very low income, many of which are communities of color.

Aston Tower- 161 dwelling units, 164 residents
Bartlett Arms- 114 dwelling units, 119 residents
Altamont Apts- 55 dwelling units, 55 residents
Woodfin Apts- 18 dwelling units, 18 residents
Asheville Terrace- 248 dwelling units, 248 residents
Maple Crest- 212 dwelling units, TBD residents
Scattered Sites- 47 dwelling units, 105 residents (not all scattered sites will be able to be served at this time)

3) Digital Literacy:

The beneficiary for this program will be over 300 individuals who struggle with digital divide, mainly senior citizens, formerly incarcerated, low-income populations, and English as a second language on a voluntary basis. Training will be provided for digital navigators who are willing to start digital literacy programs with these demographics.

Results*

Describe the proposed impact of the project. List at least 3 performance measures that will be tracked and reported. If possible, include baselines and goals for each performance measure.

This impact of this project is to get people of the community the connectivity they need.

- 1) Serving 700+ residents of the Asheville Housing community with affordable WIFI at speeds no less than 25/3
- 2) Create database of short extension projects and prioritize based on funding and complexity of project.
- 3) Serve 50-80 unserved/underserved households of Buncombe County community at speeds no less than 25/3 with new service (priority requirements will be 100/20)
- 4) Implement programming and curriculum for 300+ digitally challenged Buncombe County Residents

Evaluation*

Describe the data collection, analysis, and quality assurance measures you will use to assure ongoing, effective tracking of contract requirements and outcomes.

Land of Sky Regional Council will work with project partners to assure proper accounting of project details. Land of Sky has extensive work with managing federal grants and will create appropriate measurements on this project. Our contracts with provider partners will include project implementation schedules, due diligence on provider expertise, and work with the state broadband office to assure compliance with state and federal policy. All program goals will be tracked through spreadsheets and narrative reporting.

Equity Impact*

How will this effort help build toward a just, equitable, and sustainable COVID-19 recovery? How are the root causes and/or disproportionate impacts of inequities addressed?

The digital divide is real, too many people go without access because of cost barriers or access to broadband infrastructure. People who did not have broadband during the pandemic struggled more than those with broadband access because more of their basic needs such as education and healthcare could more easily be met through broadband resources. Unfortunately, many of the citizens who were considered unserved with broadband are in rural areas, communities of color, English as a second language, and low-income citizens.

The root cause of broadband inequity is that private sector owns the broadband infrastructure and needs to meet appropriate return on investment. North Carolina law is prohibitive of how local governments can interface with broadband deployment, which means that sensitivity towards marginalized communities is often unconsidered. As a result, people who cannot afford the service will not get it, and places that are expensive to deploy to with low population density will never get broadband service without government intervention.

To address this issue we propose funding the gap for individuals with cost barriers through increased public WIFI and supporting providers in unserved areas with funding to subsidize deployment costs. Taking these steps will help build toward a just, equitable, and sustainable COVID-19 recovery.

This solution addresses the least of these in our community with a viable sustainable solution for basic needs such as education, telehealth, community, and business services.

The mission of the "Connecting All Communities" is to make sure that all families have access to equitable broadband.

Project Partners*

Identify any subcontractors you intend to use for the proposed scope of work. For each subcontractor listed, indicate:

- 1.) What products and/or services are to be supplied by that subcontractor and;
- 2.) What percentage of the overall scope of work that subcontractor will perform.

Also, list non-funded key partners critical to project.

Access:

The project will fund a Internet Service Provider(s) to deploy broadband infrastructure in small extension projects. - subcontractor(s) TBD after data review

Adoption:

The project will fund a subcontractor to deploy WIFI services in public housing- subcontractor TBD, RFP complete (20% of budget percentage)

Digital Inclusion:

This project may fund a subcontractor to help support digital inclusion work such as training programs for seniors, previously incarcerated, low-income, and English as a second language populations, subcontractor TBD. (1% of budget)

Other key non-funded partners are the Asheville Public Housing Authority, Area Agency on Aging, WNC Broadband Project, Mountain Area Workforce Development Board, UNCA, AB Tech, City of Asheville, Buncombe County Schools, City of Asheville Schools, and United Way.

Capacity*

Describe the background, experience, and capabilities of your organization or department as it relates to capacity for delivering the proposed project and managing federal funds.

Land of Sky Regional Council will be the lead programmatic support for this project. Organizationally, they have years of experience and success managing federal grants including a number of previous ARC, EDA, CDBG, and other awards to Land of Sky and their member governments. Land of Sky has a dedicated finance team trained in procurement, grants management, and federal restrictions.

Land of Sky Regional Council also has been leading the WestNGN Broadband Initiative over the last several years. WestNGN has gained local, state, and national recognition as being a progressive community-driven model for broadband growth. Through the work of WestNGN we have completed numerous planning and data analysis on the extensive need for broadband and barriers to broadband deployment in Western North Carolina. This work has led to numerous projects across the region increasing broadband access and adoption, including active participation of the Buncombe County Broadband Working Group. WestNGN has been awarded projects to create the Buncombe County Broadband study, hosts broadband leadership training, assist local governments with broadband RFPs, set up public WIFI in community centers in rural areas, digital inclusion planning for the region, creation of the WIFI lot inventory, provide technical support to local governments, partner with Buncombe County library on hot spot/laptop lending, created a hot spot lending program for organizations, and act as a liaison to internet service providers in the region. WestNGN staff regularly meet with policymakers, funding agencies, and community leaders to help shape progress in broadband for WNC.

Budget*

Provide a detailed project budget including all proposed project revenues and expenditures, including explanations and methodology. For all revenue sources, list the funder and denote whether funds are confirmed or pending. For project expenses, denote all capital vs. operating costs, and reflect which specific expenses are proposed to be funded with one-time Buncombe County Recovery Funds.

Download a copy of the budget form [HERE](#). Complete the form, and upload it using the button below.

Land of Sky Broadband in Buncombe- Connecting all Communities .xlsx

Special Considerations*

Provide any other information that might assist the County in its selection.

Please check out the Buncombe County Broadband Community Profile for more broadband information-
http://www.landofsky.org/pdf/LGS/Broadband/BuncombeCounty_CommunityProfile2019.pdf

Please check out the draft Land of Sky Digital Inclusion plan-
<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/4a153bf426cf4a46849cbeab4cdf7a66>

If budget numbers are too high, small extensions amount can be scaled to do fewer homes as a pilot.

Please contact with any questions.

File Attachment Summary

Applicant File Uploads

- Land of Sky Broadband in Buncombe- Connecting all Communities .xlsx

List expenses here			\$	-		
			Total	\$	1,945,000.00	