



PRESS RELEASE

Franklin County Board of Supervisors and Broadband Authority Seeks Universal Internet Coverage with Significant Funding for Comprehensive Broadband Enhancements in County

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Rocky Mount, Virginia – The Franklin County Broadband Authority directed staff at its August 30th meeting to move forward with two comprehensive proposals to bring broadband to the remaining unserved areas of Franklin County. The Authority approved moving forward with a proposal by Shentel and a second by River Street Networks to provide high speed broadband services to over 5000 homes and businesses in some of the hardest to reach areas of Franklin County.

The County will be submitting grant funding requests to the Virginia Telecommunications Initiative (VATI) Program for \$30 million. The Virginia Telecommunication Initiative (VATI) Program, administered by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), is intended to extend broadband service to currently unserved areas. VATI prepares communities to build, utilize, and capitalize on telecommunications infrastructure with the goal of creating strong, competitive communities. At the August special session of the General Assembly, they approved \$700 million of broadband funding for the VATI program, an increase from the previously allocated \$50 million. The County plans to invest up to \$7.7 million of County funds received from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) into these projects over 24-36 months. Additional investment of over \$11 million will come from the private partners and other grant funding.

“These applications represent a significant investment by the County and our private partners in eliminating the digital divide in Franklin County” said Ronnie Thompson, Chairman of the Franklin County Board of Supervisors. “The County Board of Supervisors and Broadband Authority see these two comprehensive projects as a once in a generation opportunity where we could leverage a significant amount of Federal funding received by the County with available state funding for broadband.”

The River Street Networks project plans to provide fiber to the home for over 2000 homes and businesses in the Endicott/Henry and Sago/Snow Creek areas of Franklin County. River Street is a wholly owned for profit subsidiary of Wilkes TMC, established in 1951, serving customers in five states – NC, VA, SC, GA, and TN with a sole focus of serving unserved and underserved areas that lack high speed internet access at affordable rates. This project will be part of a regional project with Carroll, Patrick and Henry Counties. Much of this project includes areas that received some Federal funding from the FCC’s Rural Digital Opportunity Funding (RDOF) Auction in 2020. Greg Coltrain, V.P. of Business Development stated “RiverStreet is honored to be chosen by Franklin County as one of their VATI application partners. Serving the unserved in rural areas has been in our DNA since our inception in 1951. If the regional VATI application is awarded, RiverStreet will utilize additional funding to pass over 2,000 locations in Franklin County with fiber broadband services.”



The West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC) will be helping to prepare and submit the required funding application on behalf of the four counties. “The West Piedmont Planning District Commission is pleased to be partnering with Franklin County and other localities to submit a regional application to the Virginia Telecommunication Initiative. The funding approved by Franklin County will help leverage millions in state and private funding to ensure almost complete universal broadband coverage in our communities. This will position Franklin County and the West Piedmont region for success in economic development, education, and healthcare for years to come” said Michael Armbrister, WPPDC Executive Director.

American Electric Power (AEP) will also be a partner in this project to help provide “middle-mile” fiber for the project. “We’re extremely pleased to be part of the team dedicated to bringing much-needed high speed internet service to parts of Franklin County. We’re currently working on a similar project that will make broadband available in parts of rural Grayson County, and we are excited to share what we’ve learned over the past couple of years as we strategize and begin work on this equally important project” said Amanda Cox, External Affairs Manager for AEP.

The Shentel project plans to provide a fiber and small cell hybrid solution for over 3000 homes and businesses in the County. Shentel has served western Virginia communities for over 119 years focused on delivering broadband, video and voice to rural areas. Chris Kyle, V.P. of Regulatory, notes “Shentel is excited to partner with Franklin County to expand broadband to additional unserved areas. Working with Franklin County, Shentel will support the County’s plan to bring universal coverage to the citizens of Franklin over the next two years. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to close the remaining digital divide once and for all. Shentel is proud to continue its partnership with Franklin County to ensure all residents have access to reliable, high-speed internet.”

Supervisor Leland Mitchell (Snow Creek District), Chair of the Franklin County Broadband Authority wants the County citizens to know “broadband has been a priority of the local elected officials for years and these next VATI grants (if awarded) will help to achieve universal coverage within Franklin County.”

Franklin County has been working over the past three years to reduce the digital divide in the County. A broadband assessment was completed for the County in 2019 and the County was successful in receiving broadband awards totaling over \$4 million from the Virginia Tobacco Revitalization Commission and the VATI program in the past three years. The projects previously funded through these grant programs were developed in partnership with Shentel, Blue Ridge Towers and Briscnet. Much of the work has been completed with hundreds of households and businesses now having access to broadband service. A new fixed wireless system operated by Briscnet is operational in multiple locations such as Scruggs, Snow Creek, Sontag, and Grassy Hill areas. Additional service is planned to include areas such as Burnt Chimney, Callaway, Fork Mountain, Henry, Westlake and Wirtz in the coming weeks. Citizens interested in this fixed wireless service should contact Briscnet at (540) 566-4609 or online at www.briscnet.com for availability and pricing information.

Supervisor Lorie Smith (Gills Creek District), Vice-Chair of the Franklin County Broadband Authority shares “I am extremely grateful for the invaluable partnerships we are establishing to bring broadband to County residents in a comprehensive manner. Broadband is an essential component of the demands of residency; it is incumbent upon the Board of Supervisors as your elected officials to ensure these services are delivered!”



All of the County's major internet providers are registered with the Federal Communications Commission's emergency broadband program. The Emergency Broadband Benefit is an [FCC program](#) to help families and households struggling to afford internet service during the COVID-19 pandemic. This new benefit will connect eligible households to jobs, critical healthcare services, virtual classrooms, and so much more.

The Emergency Broadband Benefit will provide a discount of up to \$50 per month towards broadband service for eligible households. Eligible households can also receive a one-time discount of up to \$100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet from participating providers if they contribute more than \$10 and less than \$50 toward the purchase price. The Emergency Broadband Benefit is limited to one monthly service discount and one device discount per household. Interested citizens can find more information on this program at <https://www.fcc.gov/broadbandbenefit>.

The County will submit applications for funding of these projects on September 14th. Notices of awards are expected from the state's VATI program by the end of 2021. If funding is awarded, these projects will begin construction in 2022.

For more information on the County's Broadband Plan or recently approved VATI (Virginia Telecommunications Initiative) application go to <https://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/vati> or the Franklin County Broadband Authority page on the Franklin County website at <https://www.franklincountyva.gov/546/Broadband-Authority>.

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