

# **Establishing the Foundation for Broadband Expansion Across Williamson County**

## **Executive Overview**

*Texas is one of six states that does not have a statewide broadband plan. As the pandemic has made clear, broadband is not a luxury but a 21st century necessity. Better internet connections will enhance the delivery of county services and are critical to economic development, telemedicine delivery and public education.*

*Susan Redford, Executive Director, TAC*

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit Williamson County, closure of in-person services in our schools, businesses, libraries, and government entities affected nearly everyone. The schools, businesses and government bodies quickly pivoted to on-line services; however, many of our citizens lacked computers or access to broadband to access such things as education, unemployment applications, banking services and doctors. This wasn't new; the world today requires access to broadband. Many on-line access points will be maintained past the pandemic such as the adoption of telemedicine by nearly all medical offices. Students still need internet access after in-person classes to complete many school projects. Job applications will remain nearly all on-line. Broadband is the newest utility in our world.

Both federal and state governments recognize broadband as necessary infrastructure, the need to expand broadband service, and are supporting growth of it with programs and grants. There are a myriad of funding programs, including the Federal E-Rate program which funds a myriad of infrastructure improvements. The Emergency Broadband Benefit federal program is being rolled out to subsidize low-income families through payments to broadband providers as subsidies for computers, modems/routers, and subscriptions provided to these families. The largest program on the horizon, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, brings promise of substantial funding for improvements to broadband infrastructures.

Yes, a chicken in every pot. However to get that chicken, public and private entities and public-private partnerships need to be specific in their grant requests as to how the funds will be used. Without the data, no one has a basis for pursuing these grants. We must document and quantify the existence and need for broadband access through complete and accurate data with comprehensive surveys and creation of detailed and summary reports. Our specificities must be defined and refined through a baseline study across our county of what broadband support and access exists today. A strong study with resultant reports are needed to document inequities in broadband access throughout Williamson County. A comprehensive study would provide the data for both private and public entities to be viewed as high priority in their funding requests to expand broadband access to targeted areas in state and federal grant applications.

## **The Proposal**

Williamson County Commissioners Court

- Approve \$250,000 from the unallocated CARES Act funding from 2020, or funds from the American Rescue Plan Act, to provide funding for the study and report(s).
- Use the RFP process and contract with awarded firm to conduct the study resulting in reports and mapping layers of requested information to identify areas needing access to broadband with anticipated costs.
- The Williamson County GIS Department will integrate the GIS data deliverables into the County's Esri geospatial platform.
- Results of study will become public information for all interested parties including cities, schools, and broadband providers and will be available to support their grant applications for expansion of services.

Across the country, many cities, counties and even states have undertaken this investigation and are now primed to be first in line for this available funding. No county in Texas has reported completing this baseline work. Williamson County could be the first.