



PRESS RELEASE

Franklin County Board of Supervisors and Broadband Authority Approve Agreements to Continue Expansion of Broadband Coverage Through Additional Grant Funding and Enhanced Partnerships in the County

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Rocky Mount, Virginia – Franklin County has approved agreements to utilize grant funding awards from Virginia’s Telecommunication Grant Initiative (VATI) program for two new projects to bring broadband to the much of the remaining unserved areas of Franklin County. The County received notice earlier this year that it was awarded over \$17.7 million in funding through the VATI grant program. The VATI Program, administered by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), is intended to extend broadband service to currently unserved and underserved areas of Virginia. VATI prepares communities to build, utilize, and capitalize on telecommunications infrastructure with the goal of creating strong, competitive communities. 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. In addition to these state and local funds, investment of nearly \$24 million will come from the private partners and other grant funding.

In one project, the County has approved an agreement to continue its ongoing partnership with Shenandoah Cable Television, LLC’s (“Shentel”) to add an additional 3,500 premises to Shentel’s current coverage area in Franklin County by extending its existing cable plant and building a new fiber to the home network. A second project with River Street Networks will also provide high speed fiber to the home broadband services to over 2,000 homes and businesses in some of the hardest to reach areas in eastern and southwestern portions of Franklin County. The County also approved an agreement with VATI for the use of these grant funds in the County.

“These projects represent a significant investment by the State of Virginia, Franklin 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 County looks forward to continuing our relationship with Shentel and working with new partners to bring these projects to completion over the next 2-3 years.”

The Shentel project plans to extend its existing cable plant and build a new fiber to the home network to reach over 3500 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 continue the partnership with Franklin County to expand broadband to additional unserved and underserved 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.”

The County also signed agreements for a second new broadband project with RiverStreet Communications of Virginia, Inc. (d/b/a RiverStreet Networks) which involves a new partnership with the County to provide fiber-to-the-home for over 2000 homes and businesses in the Endicott/Henry and Sago/Snow Creek areas of Franklin County. This project with River Street Networks is part of a regional project with 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. 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. "Keeping true to our mission of bringing high speed internet to the unserved and underserved communities, RiverStreet Networks is proud to be a part of such a huge project in Virginia. High speed internet is a type of communication where everyone can speak the same digital language. Most everything we do in our daily lives can be done over the internet" stated Eric Cramer, President and CEO of RiverStreet Networks.

The West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC) will be administering the grant on behalf of the three counties. "West Piedmont Planning District Commission is pleased to be partnering with Franklin County and other localities, RiverStreet Networks, and Appalachian Power to extend broadband access to homes and businesses. The funding awarded through the Virginia Telecommunication Initiative is a game changer and will ensure almost complete universal coverage of broadband in our region. 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." said Amanda Cox, External Affairs Manager for AEP.

These projects are both currently under design and permitting and construction activities are expected to begin later this year. 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. Much of the work funded through these grant projects has been completed with thousands of households and businesses in the County now having access to broadband service. In addition to Shentel services the County also partnered with Seiontec Systems to deploy a fixed wireless system throughout much of the County known as Infinasky. Citizens interested in connecting to this fixed wireless service with InfinaSky should contact them at 540.318.3120 or online at www.infinasky.com for availability and pricing information.

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

Earlier last week, County officials announced that the County has placed fourth in the nation in the Annual Digital Counties Survey. This is the thirteenth year the County has placed in the nation's top ten annual ranking which recognizes counties that are leading the way in using information and communications technology.

The national ranking is issued by the Center for Digital Government (CDG), in partnership with the National Association of Counties (NACo). The survey identifies the best technology practices among U.S. counties, including initiatives that streamline delivery of government services; encourage collaboration; enhance cybersecurity; and apply innovative and emerging technologies to county priorities. "Our nation's top counties continue to succeed and deliver on key services, breaking down barriers to broadband connectivity and accessibility, building upon innovative and smart initiatives that enable government to better plan for and protect their citizens, constituents, and assets," said Brian Cohen, vice-president, CDG. "The Center for Digital Government is excited to recognize and congratulate this year's winners for their accomplishments and continuing efforts to use technology to make government better."

For more information regarding the County's recent 4th placement Digital Counties ranking please go to <https://www.franklincountyva.gov/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=772>.

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