"It's a 3-legged stool: people need water, electricity, and broadband":
Broadband Stories from Rural Texas

January 2021

Texas Rural Funders

With the COVID-19 epidemic, rural Texans need broadband internet access more than ever before. Students were sent home from school in March, many in districts that moved to remote learning. Jasper ISD Superintendent John Seybold made the point very clear; students could be supported well enough in a school setting, but young people and their families migrated back to their schools, to town libraries, to McDonald's, to sit outside the building and do their work. Even though districts have invested millions in 1:1 initiatives to provide devices to all learners, and paired those devices with hotspots, connectivity in rural regions is limited for many reasons. Sometimes those limits are caused by the high cost of having only a single provider. Other times, siblings or parents studying and working on existing connections squeeze available bandwidth.

Operation Connectivity, the $786M investment from Governor Abbott, Texas Education Agency, and Texas Division of Emergency Management, procured devices and reimbursed districts for eLearning devices and hotspots. This provides tremendous support for thousands of students. Yet, it simply does not address the underlying issue for hundreds of thousands of Texas children for whom that internet hotspot signifies the Digital Divide. Hotspots and devices don't address the larger issues of infrastructure, speed, and affordability of broadband access. The millions invested are a short-term remedy for the lack of planning for broadband access for all Texans. However, collaboration and targeted investment will engage more people in the economy for a generation of Texans.

While K-12 students put a face on the impact of insufficient broadband, there are many other faces to the problem. College students are at home, too, Zooming in to their classes to see their professors. Telecommuting, once relegated to the margins of the workforce, has become commonplace for many workers whose offices closed with the pandemic, and stayed closed. Hospitals and clinics have limited access to patients in many instances, making telehealth options not only beneficial, but required for many Texas families.

Yet broadband constraints aren't new for many users. Police officers and EMTs use software that updates their internet access automatically when they hit a new cell tower. In rural parts of the state, first responders could have one to two minutes without a connection to the dispatcher. Body cams or ambulance-based video cameras that enable two-way, real-time communication, don't work, and can mean the difference of life or death for patients.

The speed, reliability, and cost that is considered standard in Texas's cities is not an option for many rural residents. T. L. L. Temple Foundation president Wynn Rosser shared that "We know that rural east Texans pay 400% more per megabit than do residents of DFW for less reliable, lower-speed connections…that means jobs. The 10-year economic impact is billions of dollars and 10,000 jobs. The opportunity to return to rural areas to live and work remotely, to connect to the 21st century economy and 21st century workforce is here, if the infrastructure was here. The rural lifestyle looks a lot better, if I can connect."

Texas's cities are expanding, and business and residences move together. Adena Lewis, Director of Tourism and Economic Development for Bastrop County, shares that people were leaving Austin before the COVID pandemic, but it has only accelerated since early 2020. "People found out they could leave their downtown offices and the life that went with it," she said, "and then they get here, and everyone in the family needs to be connected." Broadband is seen as a third utility. "It's a three-legged stool: people need water, electricity, and broadband."

Broadband is a non-negotiable for business expansion. Teresa Burnett, Executive Director of the Monahans Chamber of Commerce in Ward County, reports that area realtors lost prospects from Fortune 500 companies looking to relocate in the community because broadband wasn't available. Jasper County Economic Development Director Eddie Hopkins says, "If a community doesn't have broadband, businesses don't come. So much technology is needed, even in manufacturing. If they can't get broadband, I don't get any new prospects. It's plain and simple."

Texans on the move depend on strong broadband, too. Being "off the grid" has lost some of its allure for those enjoying hunting leases and rustic camping spots. And having to wait until you get to a town to find a hotel for the night or a restaurant to try doesn't cut it for travelers who value the safety and convenience of constant connection.

Rural broadband access was important last year, its importance has been heightened in the COVID pandemic, and it will matter next year and for years to come. A catalytic investment in broadband creates a cycle of economic growth, by expanding businesses, supporting growth in ecommerce and home-based businesses, and retaining more highly-educated and skilled workers in rural environments; this allows young people to stay local rather than leaving to seek higher-paying jobs in cities. These shifts lead to population growth and a growing tax base, which is rare across rural Texas, and nationwide.

"The reasons we need broadband are no different than the reasons we needed electricity in the early 1900s. The leadership we need now is no different than what we needed between President Roosevelt and President Johnson to ensure that rural residents have access to the utilities they need to participate fully in society."
— WYNN ROSSER, PRESIDENT OF T.L.L. TEMPLE FOUNDATION, LUFKIN, TEXAS

Rural Broadband by the Numbers

AN ESTIMATED
878,000 Texans in

317,000 households

DO NOT HAVE PHYSICAL ACCESS TO BROADBAND.[1]

90% OF DISCONNECTED TEXANS ARE IN RURAL AREAS.[1]

35TH in broadband adoption

AMONG U.S. STATES & TERRITORIES.[2]

TEXAS IS
1 OF 6
states without

A STATEWIDE BROADBAND PLAN.[2]

768 Kbps
(KILOBITS PER SECOND)

2010 FCC broadband definition

2015
25 Mbps
(MEGABITS PER SECOND)

Current FCC broadband definition

1000 Mbps or 1 Gbps
(MEGABITS PER SECOND OR GIGABITS PER SECOND)

Fastest service currently available

[1]https://connectednation.org/texas/what-can-texas-do/, accessed 10/20/20
[2]https://broadbandnow.com/bandwidth-calculator)

Learning to Speak Broadband

- **BANDWIDTH:** the measure of telecommunications and internet networks to transmit data and signals. It is generally expressed in gigabits per second (Gbps) or megabits per second (Mbps).

- **BROADBAND:** reliable high-speed internet access that is always on, defined by the Federal Communications Commission as having download speeds of at least 25 megabits per second (Mbps) and upload speeds of at least 3 Mbps. Texas has the same definition as the FCC. This definition was established in 2015.

- **COPPER:** copper wire is the foundation of telephone lines. While copper wire has historically gone to every address, the technology is not sufficient to provide broadband. Fiber only loses 3% of the signal over distances greater than 100 meters, compared to copper's 4% loss of signal.

- **DIGITAL DIVIDE:** the gap between individuals in a population who have access to the internet and other communication technologies and those who have limited to no access.

- **DIGITAL EQUITY:** recognizes that digital access and skills are now required for full participation in many aspects of society and the economy. Digital equity highlights that a lack of access and/or skills can further isolate individuals and communities from a broad range of opportunities.

- **DIGITAL SUBSCRIBER LINE (DSL):** a technology that transmits digital data over telephone lines. DSL service is typically 5-10 Mbps, far below the definition for broadband.

- **FIXED WIRELESS INTERNET:** an alternative to wired methods of connecting to the internet that connects two fixed locations. It is local instead of orbital like satellite internet, and doesn't depend on wires like cable, fiber, or DSL. Fixed wireless internet offers options to users with limited speed or challenging line-of-sight issues, like in East Texas's Piney Woods.

- **INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDER (ISP):** a company that provides individuals, businesses, anchor institutions, etc., with a connection to the internet. ISPs include telephone and cable companies, wireless ISPs, electric cooperatives, and mobile wireless providers. They use different technologies to deliver internet service to their customers, including fiber, cable, DSL, and fixed wireless.

- **LAST MILE:** the technology or process of connecting the local provider's internet infrastructure to the home or small-business customer.

- **NETWORK INFRASTRUCTURE:** the hardware and software components of a network that provide network connectivity and allow the network to function.

- **RIGHTS OF WAY:** legal rights to pass through property owned by another. They are frequently used to secure access to land for digging trenches, deploying fiber, constructing towers and deploying equipment on existing towers and utility poles.

- **SERVICE AREA:** the entire area within which a service provider offers or intends to offer broadband service.

- **TAKE RATE:** the percentage of customers within an ISP's service area who subscribe to, or "take," the service.

- **UNSERVED AREA:** areas that lack physical access to broadband service as defined by the state program.

- **UNDERSERVED AREA:** areas that have internet service at speeds higher than those that are defined as unserved but lower than those that have broadband service as defined by the state program.

How Much Internet Do I Need?

Family of 4

- 4 LAPTOPS
- 2 SMARTPHONES
- 2 SMART TVS
- 2 SMART HOME DEVICES (I.E., ALEXA, BABY MONITOR)
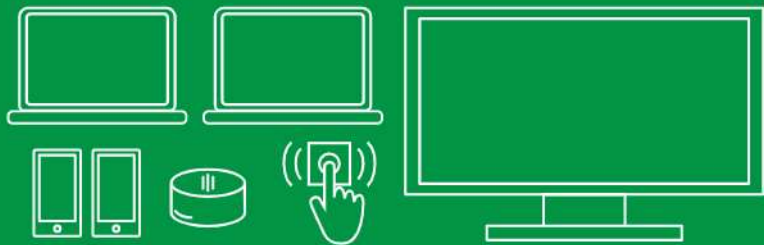- 1 GAMING DEVICE
- 1 TABLET

119 Mbps
USAGE AT A TIME

Couple

- 2 LAPTOPS
- 2 SMARTPHONES
- 1 SMART TV
- 2 SMART HOME DEVICES (I.E., GOOGLE MINI, VIDEO DOORBELL)

55 Mbps
USAGE AT A TIME

https://broadbandnow.com/bandwidth-calculator

Key Broadband Stakeholders

County coalitions across Texas consist of representatives from these core industries. This key will be used in the following profiles to demonstrate the industries represented by the coalition leaders.

Education	**Business**
Economic development	**Healthcare**
Public safety	**Local government**
Cybersecurity	**Agriculture**

Walker County

2019 POPULATION: 72,791   **COUNTY SEAT:** Huntsville

INDUSTRIES:

- Agriculture
- Health care
- Education
- Local government

Walker County is 70 miles north of Houston (and 20 minutes north of The Woodlands) via I-45. Currently, broadband fiber is available in Huntsville and a quarter-mile outside the city. Beyond that, broadband is sparse.

COMMISSIONER JIMMY HENRY

For Walker County Commissioner Jimmy Henry, the struggle with rural internet hit home. When his two college-aged children came home to New Waverly in March to start remote learning, all he had was a dial-up option. "It was awful," he said. "My children had to go to the university library [at Sam Houston State in Huntsville] to reserve computer time. It shouldn't have had to be that way."

> Broadband is no longer a convenience or luxury, but instead a necessity. A modern digital infrastructure with broadband service that is accessible and affordable for **all** is a critical component of a competitive regional ecosystem for its enterprise and residential stakeholders.

Henry and a coalition of community stakeholders decided to act. Their group of leaders, consisting of other county commissioners, the Forest Service from the Sam Houston State Forest, law enforcement professionals, and superintendents recognized that they could have more impact together. In January 2020, together with Connected Nation Texas, they launched a county-wide survey to assess broadband technology access and adoption.

Of 688 households surveyed in Walker County

97%
OF INTERNET SUBSCRIBERS
would like more options

7 OF 10
INTERNET SUBSCRIBERS SAID
their current service
does not meet their needs
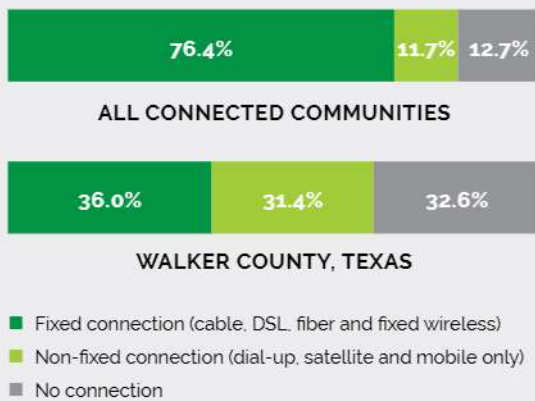DUE TO SLOW SPEEDS AND
UNRELIABLE SERVICE AVAILABLE

2 OF 5
SAID THAT THEIR
mobile network was
their primary internet
connection
AT THEIR HOME

Walker County

Home Broadband Adoption[1]

76.4%	11.7%	12.7%

ALL CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

36.0%	31.4%	32.6%

WALKER COUNTY, TEXAS

■ Fixed connection (cable, DSL, fiber and fixed wireless)
■ Non-fixed connection (dial-up, satellite and mobile only)
■ No connection

The survey revealed that regional trends in Walker County echo national trends. "People who are less likely to have internet connectivity are poor, elderly, rural, speak English as a second language, or have less education – and that hasn't changed since the 1990s," says Larry Irving, the former U.S. Assistant Secretary for Commerce. Not being connected to the internet reduces people's chances of social distancing, having good health, educating their children, finding a job, and running a business. Many people, particularly the elderly, often have to go see a doctor or go shopping in person because they don't have access to telemedicine or online shopping.

Telemedicine provides support for many rural Texans. With very few physicians practicing in rural Texas, tele-hospitalists care for critically ill patients via telehealth technology. Patients can be cared for closer to home, and the local hospital can generate new revenue. Additionally, rural hospitals have a limited number of medical specialists, and broadband provides access to specialists for consultation. The ability to administer mental health services via telehealth leads to better quality of life for the many Texans who suffer from mental illness. And "total wellness" not only relies on telemedicine, but on access to social interaction. Internet access can help individuals overcome social isolation. It can assist in maintaining the social health of elderly Texans by allowing them to have virtual contact with others while social distancing. Affordable, reliable high-speed internet access is important to enable all Texans to enhance their quality of life.

[1]https://connectednation.org/texas/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2020/10/CN_Walker-County-Texas-Summary_FINAL-1.pdf, accessed 12/3/2020.

Jasper County

2018 POPULATION: 35,872   **COUNTY SEAT:** Jasper

INDUSTRIES:

- Business
- Education
- Local government
- Economic development
- Health care

EDDIE HOPKINS, JEDCO ED

"There are a lot of people in the metropolitan areas that don't understand the obstacles our kids have in the country, and it's not fair. I hate to be penalized because of my zip code. I'm hoping the initiatives we're seeing with broadband will focus on rural Texas. It's not fair for our kids who have to live where they live, because of their parents. They're discriminated against based on where they're born." Jasper County Economic Development Corporation Executive Director before Eddie Hopkins makes that case for the impact of broadband.

His colleague, Jasper ISD superintendent John Seybold, shared that his students experience the Digital Divide as the Homework Divide. "We invested $2 million in devices and hotspots for our 1:1 initiative. At school, we have reliable internet and we pay a lot of money for dedicated lines. Once you leave the building, it's not nearly as good. We were sending kids home with a device and a hotspot, and we might as well have sent them home with a laptop and a rock, because they didn't get internet. We had to depend on packets," he said, paper-based instruction and worksheets to try to keep students engaged and on grade level. Some districts wired buses with hotspots and would drive to rural areas in the evenings, enabling families to come together

after school to get broadband access. "It's a pretty smart idea," Hopkins shared, "but it's a shame they have to do that."

JOHN SEYBOLD, JASPER ISD SUPERINTENDENT

Superintendent Seybold also invests in building the skills of all his system's users. With the move to online instruction and the 1:1 device initiative, two instructional technologists work with parents and family members to support students in using computers and accessing Google Classroom, the primary application used for online instruction.

"This isn't going to be solved this year, but five years down the road, broadband access in our district can eliminate the Digital Divide. Our kids are so limited in their exposure." Seybold shared that fiber was the best solution, referencing the "Pine Curtain," the dense Piney Woods of East Texas that hinder satellite internet, microwave transmission, and other lower-cost internet solutions from being sufficient. Hurricanes Ike and Rita wiped out cable providers by taking out the above-ground cable hardware on utility poles, an infrastructure system that could have been used to bring broadband internet to rural areas.

Jasper County

JUDGE MARK ALLEN

Judge Mark Allen provides another perspective. "I look at broadband as a utility," he said, "no different than electricity back in the 1930s and 1940s, when people had to work together to get state governments to see the importance of electricity." He referred to Lyndon Johnson and his early work as an elected official to bring electricity to rural Texans, deemed difficult and expensive to serve.

In 1935 Congress created the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) to make low-interest loans to electric cooperatives so that rural areas could be wired. But for Lyndon B. Johnson's constituents there was a catch: The REA required at least three families per mile of line, and the Hill Country was just too sparsely populated. Johnson began working to get enough farmers to join the newly formed Pedernales Electric Cooperative. With the same tireless energy that he had applied to his political campaigning, he traveled door to door urging families to sign up.[1]

This Jasper County broadband coalition includes all five school district superintendents, hospitals and medical professionals, and local manufacturing companies. Through mapping available services and speeds across the county, they found significant gaps between what they experienced and what their broadband providers reported to the Federal Communications Commission. That discrepancy was common across many regions of rural Texas. Providers map coverage by towers, measuring 360 degrees of the coverage zone, though hills, trees, or other natural barriers often impact coverage. Hopkins shared that advocacy partners have helped develop more accurate maps for use for planning.

For Judge Allen, it's personal. "I have a deep appreciation for the lack of internet... We need to get to where we can utilize the internet like it's supposed to be. That's what it's going to take for our kids to achieve. Without that, it hinders our kids from their ability to compete when they graduate from high school and get into college or the job market. It's important to us."

[1]https://www.americanheritage.com/node/132467

Bastrop County

2019 POPULATION: 88,723   **COUNTY SEAT:** Bastrop

INDUSTRIES:

$ Economic development

🏛 Local government

✚ Health care

⚠ Public safety

Bastrop County was once a shining star for internet access in Texas. Ten years ago, Bastrop County was profiled for their high percentage of residents connected (when broadband speed was defined at 3% of the current definition). Yet, as technology moved on, Bastrop's infrastructure stood still. What was once a marketing strategy to draw companies and residents to Bastrop became a hindrance.

97% OF BASTROP COUNTY IS UNINCORPORATED
resulting in businesses and residences with spotty internet service
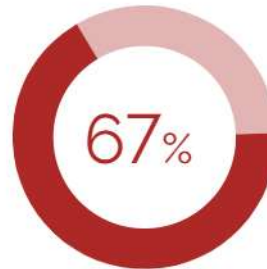
67% OF THE POPULATION LIVES IN UNINCORPORATED AREAS
with limited connectivity

Local leaders have seen robust real estate activity since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, with more interest in acreages as Austinites seek to work from home in the country.

Homes with broadband accesss are valued at **3.1% higher** than homes without broadband access.[1]

"We've known for a long time we were behind the curve in getting broadband to our rural areas. The need now is higher than it's ever been," shares Judge Paul Pape of Bastrop County.

PAUL PAPE

https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00036846.2019.1631443?journalCode=raec20, accessed 12/14/20.
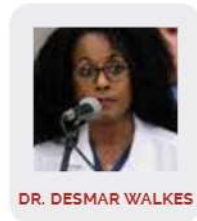
Bastrop County

Bastrop County echoes what has been shared in other counties. Economic development and tourism director Adena Lewis shares, "If a Texas legislator brings up a map of Bastrop County, we look like we are lit all over the county... The reality is that what the FCC says is available and what is available on the ground does not match." Jennifer Harris of Connected Nation Texas puts that into context. "Federal data is not collected in a granular or timely manner, and is not validated in any sense, which leads to overstatement or understatement. Overstatement causes problems for communities because they don't qualify for federal funds, and providers don't see opportunities to grow because they think the area is covered."

ADENA LEWIS

Lewis shared that "Broadband is not a luxury item for streaming Netflix — this is how people make a living, this is how they talk to their doctors, this is how they educate their children. We have lost a lot of economic development in Bastrop County because of the high, high, high cost to get their lot lit with broadband access."

The Bastrop County Health Authority Dr. Desmar Walkes, who is leading the local response to the coronavirus pandemic, weighs in, too. "Access to health care through the internet is key to providing our community with vital information, as well as effective care. The lack of consistent internet service in Bastrop County limits public access to care, which ultimately costs all of us time, money, and in some cases, lives."

DR. DESMAR WALKES

From a public safety perspective, Bastrop County IT Director Kevin Unger shares that having broadband is critical for law enforcement to be effective and community members to be safe. "We have video footage of what goes on in the police cars and what goes on a body camera. Today, that all uploads when they get back to the sheriff's office." Unger shares, "If they had better broadband, footage could stream live to command posts, so supervisors could watch their people in the field and help them make decisions. If the sheriff wanted to see a SWAT team move in and advance people or pull people back, he could see that in real time. That's all done via radio now, and there are only so many people who can talk on a radio system at the same time." Reliable broadband would protect first responders and citizens in a county that currently has significant holes in coverage.

KEVIN UNGER

A broadband-focused coalition of county leaders has pulled together to quantify the demand and create a plan for moving forward. Bastrop County conducted a survey that received more than 4,500 responses, with representation from residents, business, public safety, library, agriculture, education, health care, and government providing their perspectives; they shared critical information on what services are available, how well they work, how much current access costs, and what they would pay for if service were expanded. Bastrop County's advocacy partner is analyzing responses, and the coalition is identifying funding sources for build-out.

Says Judge Pape, "We know we're going to have to have growth — the Tesla plant is closer to Bastrop County than downtown Austin. We would ideally plan pockets of growth and add fiber in the trench when it's dug by TxDOT or a private contractor." They are actively and collectively engaging to again make Bastrop County a shining star for broadband access.

Ward County

2018 POPULATION: 11,720   **COUNTY SEAT:** Monahans

INDUSTRIES:

Business

Economic development

Public safety

Cybersecurity

Health care

Ward County is in the heart of the Permian Basin. Due to the strength of the energy economy, Monahans has grown more than 10% since 2010, with five streets of new $300K houses and expanded capacity for electricity, waste water, and trash.

Since 2016, a coalition of local leaders has been engaged in pursuing county-wide broadband internet access. Teresa Burnett, the Executive Director of the Monahans Chamber of Commerce, was one of many community-oriented people who came together on the project. They collaborated with private philanthropy to provide support for a broadband study of the county. She was a key player in getting people to respond to the 2017 Connected Nation Texas survey, driving responses at 100% of the target rate in four weeks' time.

TERESA BURNETT

The results were astounding. Community members were surprised to learn they were paying for speeds that they weren't actually getting, and in fact, paying double what urban areas spend. Residents had difficulty connecting to the internet, and once connected, were often quickly booted off.

The school system, hospital, and sheriff's office all spent extra to install special connections to keep essential communications, such as 911 and dispatch, functioning. Across the board, residents reported being unable to use multiple devices in a building at the same time; for example, one person couldn't use their laptop while another person streamed a video. Burnett was the first-ever recipient of the Texas Broadband Hero award; during her November 2020 award ceremony, her internet dropped three times.

The Ward County team's research helped them identify benefits they wanted for their citizens. A reliable connection could literally save lives with paramedics being able to speak to a doctor while en route to the ER. Children could participate in virtual learning and grow technology skills to prepare them for the 21st century job market. Businesses could locate to Monahans with the guarantee of communication with headquarters, the ability to use their technology effectively, and even the simple assurance that their credit card machines would work.

Ward County

Teresa Burnett sees broadband as a security issue for the region. She says:

> "If you want to hurt the United States, you're going to go where the source of the energy is, and we're a key target area. With us needing more services in broadband in our area, it's a necessity that we're connected to the world and the United States."

Engineer Carroll Faulkner partnered with the Ward County team on their technical plan. He identified federal grant money that is available to build the infrastructure. However, the application scoring mechanism and the way that national broadband data is collected puts Ward County at

CARROLL FAULKNER

a disadvantage. He shared "Texas doesn't have a statewide plan, and the FCC mapping looked like connections were better than the speeds at which they were validated. We lose lots of federal dollars because of that."

When the CARES Act was announced, the Economic Development Administration's regional office in Austin was allocated $220M for grants. Grants from the Economic Development Administration typically go for water plants or roadways, but broadband was added to the list with this round. The Ward County community has been awarded a $1.5M grant and raised a local match of $600K. They plan to develop a public-private partnership with a private entity that wants to build and operate the system. The City of Monahans will own the system, and generate growing revenue for the city. The team is optimistic to break ground in early 2021. And Teresa Burnett can't wait to have a stable video connection as she recruits businesses to Ward County.

> "Broadband internet used to be a luxury, and it used to be something not everybody had. You used it for online ordering or gaming. But it's not a luxury anymore. It's a necessity everyone ought to have in their household, their business, and their community."
>
> **TERESA BURNETT**

Steps Communities Can Take to Improve Broadband Availability

Policymakers and other stakeholders can support community coalitions in their pursuit of securing broadband. Here is a sample process for bringing broadband internet to rural communities.

1 **Establish a vision.** Community members first need to pull together to establish a vision for what broadband access for all citizens will mean for them. Community anchor organizations engage and collaborate at this stage to activate their networks and accelerate involvement. There may be a community committee established with formal meetings, or joint accountability to drive the collaborative process of securing broadband.

2 **Conduct a current state analysis.** Review broadband maps for the community and assess available broadband services to understand the baseline service available.

3 **Survey community members to understand goals, current state, and willingness to invest at different levels.** Map the constituent groups you want to survey, and make person-to-person connections to achieve response targets.

4 **Verify existing maps.** Many counties have maps of the service that is provided in name, but what's true on the ground is often different. Sometimes it's the impact of terrain that makes the difference, and sometimes the unit for maps is too big for accurate reporting. Verifying broadband availability can be done in several ways, including speed tests, community surveys, public comment, and field validations of telecommunications infrastructure.

5 **Develop a technology plan.** There are an endless number of options on how to connect a community and provide all citizens with broadband. Identify partners to develop a thorough and efficient plan to connect across all sectors of the community. A critical and often overlooked step is measuring the current and future demand for broadband among residents, businesses, and community anchor institutions, and ensuring the plan meets these needs.

6   **Activate partnerships**. There are many players in the broadband ecosystem. Listen to and learn from diverse stakeholders groups and network with other communities to inform productive partnerships.

> Expanding broadband into sparsely populated areas often produces low or zero return on investment for the private sector. This is due to significantly higher deployment costs, lengthier middle-mile networks, or challenging terrain. Partnerships can bridge this gap by bringing multiple assets together to successfully expand broadband access and adoption. A partnership among entities of all types, public, private, and non-profit, can deliver profitable and reliable service to rural Texans, while addressing economic challenges by sharing capital costs and enhancing revenue potential.

7   **Take Action**. It is a collective effort. Counties, Councils of Governments (COGs), workforce boards, companies, foundations, and the state are all resources. Work together to secure funds to incentivize buildout or reduce barriers that often discourage broadband deployment.

> Awareness and urgency for improving broadband have reached unprecedented levels with the global pandemic. There is increasing support for partnerships and build-out through a combination of support from federal grants, state funding, corporate pledges, and local philanthropy. Now is the time.

8   **Promote broadband benefits**. Engage people in identifying ways that broadband will impact their lives. Engage with realtors, chambers of commerce, business and governmental users, students and parents. Map impacts and investments that make sense. **Share your story!** Enable others to learn from your success and challenges as they pursue their own process.

9   **Learn, adapt, and replicate**. Now that you've established these collaborative relationships across your community, what other issues do you want to take on? How can your success with broadband inform a bigger strategic plan for the growth of your community? Share the impact with your legislators and help them to see the new frontier for investment and engagement in rural Texas.

Policy Recommendations

Governor Abbott has established a Broadband Development Council that completes an annual report each November. Policy recommendations from the 2020 report include the following:

- Help educate community leaders and establish an Office of Broadband to be a single point of contact to direct efforts statewide, and to facilitate the development of the statewide Broadband Plan.

- Texas should establish a state Broadband Plan that:

  - Defines goals and objectives
  - Identifies steps to achieve them
  - Helps guide state investments
  - Provides a baseline against which to measure progress
  - Provides a framework for local planning efforts

State legislators can support the development of local plans that:

- Help educate community leaders and residents, putting them in a better position to work with providers to expand and accelerate broadband.

- Engage stakeholders with a wide range of interests to inform the plan's scope and scale. The process itself benefits the community by building the shared vision, buy-in, and relationships to develop sustainable solutions for the area, whether the solution is broadband or any other common good.

Texas is one of only six states without a broadband plan. Yes, Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Oklahoma have broadband plans.

"Leaders across the state are working to organize their communities around broadband access, and have demonstrated time and time again the dogged determination we Texans pride ourselves on. With a state broadband plan and a dedicated office, Texas can amplify the good work already being done at the local level and take great strides toward getting all Texans connected."

ELLEN RAY, CHAIR OF TEXAS RURAL FUNDERS

Texas Rural Funders