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Board Approves Partnering with Sierra Business Council to Expand Broadband through Last-Mile Broadband Grant

At Tuesday's July 23rd Board of Supervisors meeting, the Board unanimously approved a contract with the Sierra Business Council (SBC) for the administration of the Last-Mile Broadband Grant program, a grant for the development and expansion of Broadband in Nevada County. The grant will be funded by what the County receives for transient occupancy tax (TOT), a tourism-related tax charged to travelers when they rent accommodations for less than 30 days.

"Thank you," District I Supervisor Heidi Hall said to staff after the presentation. "I am so excited we are working to resolve this without waiting for the State or Federal Government to make progress... Let's get connected!"

The \$225,000 Last-Mile Broadband Grant is a pilot program to leverage County funds to support the development of Last-Mile Broadband infrastructure in the unincorporated areas of the County to promote economic development. Last-Mile refers to connecting the end-user or customer's home or business to a local network provider. The development of Last-Mile transmission networks is the most cost prohibitive component of broadband expansion in Nevada County.

"I like the project because I think number one it addresses the Board Priority on economic development and broadband, but number two, and most importantly, it addresses the community's expectation to leverage TOT dollars to bring broadband to the community," said District III Supervisor Dan Miller.

It is a 2019 Board Priority to support job-enhancing economic development with an emphasis on creating infrastructure and community partnerships with organizations such as SBC. During the meeting, the Board approved a total of \$250,000 investment into economic development and broadband. Of that funding, \$25,000 going towards SBC's administration of the pilot grant program and \$225,000 that will be available for the grant.

"We understand the challenges with broadband. This money can be catalytic to secure broadband projects for this area, and we think that by leveraging funding we can increase the broadband coverage by our local providers," said Kristin York, Vice President of Sierra Business Council. "This grant is not designed to create another plan. This grant is designed to create broadband connection to homes and businesses with a goal of economic development."

As a cornerstone of the County's economic development strategy, broadband is vital to the economic interest and health of the community. High-speed broadband connections can have a positive impact by promoting the diversification of the economy, attracting and retaining high-wage businesses and companies, and increasing the long-term investment in information technology sectors. Increasing local broadband networks would also enable

continued improvements in the already existing community anchor organizations such as healthcare, public safety, schools, colleges, and libraries.

"When we are talking about broadband, we are really talking about the capacity of data to the home. Right now local connections can be compared to a garden hose. With broadband, we are talking about a 10 inch pipeline," said Information and General Services Director Steve Monaghan. "We have the middle mile coming into the community. What we lack is that last mile, so we are asking ourselves 'How do we promote that last mile and promote the providers in our community to hook up more homes and businesses.'"

Starting in 2012, Nevada County decided to allot funding the County receives from Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) towards economic development projects. In May 2019, the Board allocated \$983,211 to make the Higgins Marketplace project possible, where road widening and construction of a sewer line on Combie Road near the project site is currently underway. In partnership with Placer County, staff has been working on the feasibility of spending future TOT dollars towards a Soda Springs Visitor Center off of Highway 80 near Truckee.

Nevada County has played a role in promoting increased local broadband coverage since 2000, from supporting the ERC's effort with the Broadband Leadership Council to helping community leaders lobby for broadband funding from the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC). In July of 2018, the County, along with Nevada City and Grass Valley, passed resolutions supporting the expansion, access, and usage of broadband in the community.

Earlier this year, in January 2019, the Board also submitted a letter of support to the CPUC for the transfer of 60% or \$16 million of the entire revised project of \$26 million in CASF grant funding from Bright Fiber to Race Communications. Later that month, the CPUC approved the transfer and Race Communications has secured the company's point of presence at the Nevada County Airport which will function as the hub for the new fiber-optic network. Preliminary construction work near the airport has started; once the construction of the hub is complete, the company will begin building out from there.

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