



Audience Questions

Accessibility

Q: What are the barriers and potential solutions to expanding access to broadband?

A: The barrier is cost and funding, where the funding doesn't match the cost. North Carolina will need to invest more funding into rural broadband to ensure that some day everyone has access. With that said, the dollars spent on rural broadband need to be spent in a smart, sustainable way--that means proven technology that will deliver the broadband speeds anticipated far into the future. While more expensive upfront, deployment of land-based fiber to home services meet this criteria, and as such, our goal should be to expand fiber optics to every home in the state.

Q: Where/who do you report to if mapping is inaccurate?

A: When the FCC shows inaccurate data regarding the level of broadband in a community, you need to contact them and make that assertion with data supporting your claim. It also helps to have local government work with DIT to map out the areas where service is not available and use that information to demonstrate to elected officials in Washington that the FCC data is incorrect. It will be a fight, but it is a fight worth undertaking if you want to stand a chance to receive funding. Click [here](#) to file a formal complaint with the FCC.

Q: Is there any discussion at the legislature on addressing the long-term digital divide between the haves and have nots?

A: Yes, there has been discussion to address the long-term digital divide in North Carolina. In fact, it was the discussion within the legislative arena which led to the establishment of the Growing Rural Economies with Access to Technology (GREAT) grant program in 2018 and more than \$100 million in additional funding to be spent over the next decade. But, there is no overnight solution. The digital divide in North Carolina will only be solved through continued, smart investments over a sustained time period.

Affordability

Q: What are the ideas around subsidizing the cost of broadband for households that need help?

A: The federal government offers the Lifeline Program which allows qualifying low-income families to receive \$9.25 off each month on residential broadband to help with affordability. One of the problems with the current GREAT grant program is that the scoring criteria does not address affordability as a tool for adoptability. Many of the applicants to this year's grant program have prices that will prove to be unaffordable for low-income households. It would be a poor investment to give grant funds to companies who then turn around and charge unaffordable prices in many of the state's most economically disadvantaged areas. The state should seriously consider revising the GREAT grant scoring structure to give higher points to companies who commit to offering lower-cost service. This will ensure that grant money goes not only to companies who will expand broadband, but to companies who will expand affordable broadband.

Digital Inclusion

Q: Will there be any programs for digital literacy skills training?

A(1): <https://connectwake.org/digital-training-support/> provides a comprehensive list of online and local digital literacy resources that are available to North Carolina residents.

A(2): There are programs in place that are dedicated to improving digital literacy for K-12 students. The State Board of Education and the North Carolina Department of Public Education are committed to providing digital education to students and North Carolina has key legislation in place that supports educators in this endeavor. North Carolina Public Schools have partnered with Learning.com to provide curriculum for statewide K-8 digital literacy.

Policy

Q: How much would it cost for the state to offer lighting up all of the rural areas in our state with broadband?

A: That would depend on how you do it. There are many different technologies that can provide broadband, but it mostly depends upon whether it is deployed with wireless or wired technology. While wireless service costs the least to deploy and can be deployed faster, there are big limitations on how effective it can be given the circumstances. Every major city, and more than 99% of towns in North Carolina with more than 1,000 households, have wired service provided by either cable modem service--or in some cases fiber optics-- the premises. This is because these technologies can deliver gigabit broadband speed and have the capacity to deliver even faster speeds over time without having to replace all of the equipment in use. While a high number of counties in North Carolina have availability of fast internet in the majority of their areas, almost all counties have at least some further need for broadband expansion. There are no hard numbers that can be given, but based on the current FCC broadband map and recent projects and awards given to underserved counties in the state from federal sources, if you wanted to ensure that every home in North Carolina had at least access to 100 Mbps broadband, an estimate would be that each county could have as much as \$10-25 million in broadband need on average. More densely populated counties would need less, but more rural counties would need more. North Carolina's total broadband cost could run between \$1 to \$2 billion.

Q: Based on the broadband challenges highlighted as a result of COVID-19, what are the next steps for getting broadband deployed to unserved and underserved areas? Is it time for a statutory change? Or more exploration into how existing infrastructures, i.e. electric and telecommunications, can be leveraged to provide service? Which solution can be delivered the fastest and most economically?

A: Existing infrastructure has been looked at and has been considered for deployment of broadband, but there is no quick or inexpensive solution to this problem. In terms of delivering the solution that is the fastest and most economic to deploy, it's a question of paying now or later. The low-cost, fast-deploy solutions have limited capability and are likely to provide a lower level of broadband that, over time, will just need to be replaced with more robust, sustainable solutions (fiber to the home). Also, deploying solutions that provide broadband speeds that barely meet the 25/3 Mbps threshold for service could have the unintended impact of rendering areas with these types of service ineligible for federal programs which offer money for broadband expansion--and are the best option for funding expansion of rural broadband.

Q: As a much broader general issue, do any of our panelists believe that high-speed broadband should/will be viewed as a utility?

A: Speaking from the standpoint of a current broadband provider, it has been our experience that increased regulation has only served to slow the deployment of broadband projects.

Q: Our NC Community College system has a great framework of broadband. How can this group influence the General Assembly to leverage this NC framework?

A: North Carolina community colleges do have a great framework, but the problem isn't with the framework. The real problem with rural broadband is the cost to deploy it throughout every county and town, down every road to every address in the state. In many instances, the community college broadband framework goes to just a few sites in a county. The real cost starts when you try to get from there to each address.

Q: I would like to see a Rural Broadband Act from the federal government. Just like the Rural Electrification Act in 1936, getting affordable, reliable Broadband to everyone in Rural America (North Carolina), would give everyone "a fair chance in the race for life."

A: North Carolina's telephone cooperatives are ready and willing to build out broadband to all rural areas of the state given the availability of funding. They are perfect vehicles for doing so in that they are experienced in serving rural areas, experienced in deploying rural broadband, and they are nonprofits--so every dollar spent would go to serving rural communities with broadband access, just like the power cooperatives do with electricity. But, it will take funding to make it happen.

Q: What updates are there on state level policy and funding support for broadband now that the importance of broadband has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

A: The State has allocated and made available an additional \$9 million to fund more eligible addresses in the current round of GREAT grant submissions.

Other

Q: Please expand on the thought of only spending money one time on a solution. It is not viable to provide fiber to the home in many rural areas. How do we provide for this situation knowing that some type of wired/wireless deployment is probably the only option?

A: Wired solutions don't have to be the only option, but if they are deployed, it is highly likely that they will end up being the only option.