



BROADBAND INITIATIVE PUSHES SERVICE DOWN COUNTRY ROADS

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the lack of broadband access across the country, Dr. Althea Riddick knew it was a problem in rural Gates County, where she's lived all her life.

"It was so slow, you could cook dinner before a file loaded," said Riddick, who now works as a part-time consultant for the N.C. Rural Center's Collaborative Broadband project. The project started with a grant from the Anonymous Trust to assist in 15 counties in Northeastern North Carolina and has recently added 18 counties and the Qualla Boundary in Western North Carolina thanks to funding from the Dogwood Health Trust.

Those annoyingly slow speeds took on a different significance as COVID lockdowns required her to work from home as registrar and associate vice chancellor for continuing education at Elizabeth City State University and after she won election to the Gates County Board of Commissioners.

"That's when I really started paying attention," said Riddick, who joined Gates' board in late 2020 about the time she retired from Elizabeth City State. "I started hearing the horror stories about the school kids on school buses with hotspots, and they had to go to the library, and they didn't have transportation to get to the library with the hotspots. And it just snowballed."

COVID-related funding provided unprecedented amounts of money for the problem. But bringing broadband access to Gates and other counties in Northeastern North Carolina required a deep understanding of the technology and the region. It's flush with swamps and agricultural areas that make extending the lines more complicated. Previous attempts in Gates had been left unfinished, and there was little accountability and no accurate map showing where lines existed, said Riddick, now chair of Gates' board of commissioners.





Ever since, broadband access in the region has been a focus for Riddick. And with the Collaborative Broadband project, Riddick also guides and educates commissioners across Gates' 14 neighboring counties as they seek to boost their own county's broadband access.

"Whatever we do in Gates County, we try to share it," Riddick said. "We have more influence together than we have separate."

And what they've done in Gates has been successful; more than 93 percent of the county now has broadband access, far more than any neighboring county. Chowan County comes in second at 48 percent.

Gates' broadband action team, led by Erna Bright, who has worked in telecommunications, is behind the success. Bright has traveled across Gates to build an accurate accounting of broadband service in the area, flagging neighborhoods that weren't on existing maps and identifying challenges, such as the locations of wetlands and farm fields. And he's uncovered a problem that's getting state and federal attention — the need to raise the height of aerial lines to accommodate taller farm machinery.

With the Collaborative Broadband project, Riddick sees herself primarily as a communicator, traversing the region to explain its work to county commissioners, help them navigate broadband funding requirements and share what's happening in Gates.

"I spend most of my time ... making sure that they understand what the Collaborative is trying to do, what the broadband services providers are trying to do and how that fits into their role as commissioners," she said.

She also stresses the importance of working together, as a region, to ensure individuals, even in the most rural pockets, have what they need to thrive.

"All counties are unique, but if you don't look at the region where you sit, then you lose out on some of the appropriations, you lose out on legislation," she said. "We have to come together with our representatives to make sure our voices are heard."

As Riddick counts her wins so far, she focuses on how expanded access benefits people — kids who can complete online homework at home, small business owners who can run their online shops, farmers who can access new technologies, and patients who can meet with doctors virtually. Broadband access is essential in today's digital world, she said, and that keeps her focused on this work.

"Some people still think [broadband] is good to have," she said. "No, it's not good to have. It's necessary for all citizens to be on a level playing field."

-Dr. Althea Riddick

