

BERRIEN COUNTY BROADBAND INTERNET TASK FORCE



February 17, 2022

12:30 PM via Zoom+

Berrien County Administration Center, Otto Grau Conference Room

MEETING NOTES

Attendees: Berrien County Commissioner **Teri Freehling**; Berrien County Commissioner **Jim Curran**; Berrien County Commissioner Ezra Scott; Berrien County Administrator **Brain Dissette**; Southwest Michigan Planning Commission Executive Director **John Egelhaaf**; Berrien County Community Development Director **Dan Fette**; Oronoko Township Supervisor **Mike Hildebrand**.

Guests: Cornerstone Alliance Project Manager **Zach Vaughn**; Bainbridge Township Supervisor **Andy Gardiner**; Lincoln Charter Township Supervisor **Dick Stauffer**; Berrien Township Supervisor **Brian Bixby**; Lake Charter Township Treasurer **Bob Clark**.

- I. **Update from Cornerstone Alliance: Benton Harbor WiFi Project.** [Cornerstone Alliance](#) Project Manager Zach Vaughn updated BCBIT on the Benton Harbor Free Public WiFi Project. Funding and kick off for this project began almost one year ago with a \$200,000 community project grant allocation to Cornerstone Alliance through HUD's* Economic Development Initiative for free community WiFi in Benton Harbor, Michigan (see project description [here](#), and [public disclosure](#) notification). Cornerstone Alliance selected [AT&T](#) as a telecommunication partner for the installation of necessary WiFi apparatuses to offer free WiFi internet services. The first phase of this project is in the area of Water Street and Territorial, commonly known as the Benton Harbor Arts District. Zach expects the WiFi in this zone will be up and running March 1st. The contract for this project has 2-years remaining.

- II. **Broadband Project on Full Boil, Simmer, or Just Warming Up.** Several broadband projects were discussed, along with their status from feasible to just getting started.
 - a. **What projects are shovel-ready? (Applications Received or in-Process).** [Oronoko Township](#) has submitted their application. To date, Oronoko Township is the only application received, though some are in the works, and expected to be received soon. Administrator Dissette informed the group a [press release](#) from the Berrien County Board of Commissioners was sent out at the beginning of the month announcing the process to request American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Funds for

* United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. Commonly referred to as [HUD](#), is responsible for national policy and programs that address our Nation's housing needs.

broadband deployment from Berrien County as a sub-grantee. The announcement cited the approved [resolution](#), [county ARPA information link](#), and associated Berrien County ARPA Broadband Sub-Grant [Application](#) for local entities to complete and submit if they are seeking funds supporting broadband deployment in their community.

b. What projects at the next level away (from shovel-ready)? [Bainbridge Township](#) is just about ready to submit their application. Bainbridge Township Supervisor Andy Gardiner discussed with the group a few questions he had as points of clarification. Mainly, through his efforts, he knows what it will cost to get high-speed internet to an unserved part of his township. His conundrum is whether to include any of his communities ARPA dollars in support of the project, or can he ask for the entire project's funding from the County, and save his ARPA dollars for other uses yet to be determined. For broadband deployment in Bainbridge Township serving the unserved and underserved, Andy received a quote from MEC to install 15 miles of fiber for a total cost of \$750,000. Primarily, he has blocks of homes in Bainbridge Township with no internet, and completely missed, or skipped with the [RDOF](#) Project currently underway. Administrator Dissette stated the higher the level of local match, or local leverage, will bump-up the points in the application's final score in the scoring criteria. For example, a 1:1 financial match, one part applicant, one-part County, shows there is some skin in the game.

c. What projects are just beginning to get off the ground? John Egelhaaf, [SWMPC](#), reported his outreach efforts to Harbor Country and the Pokagon Fund regarding BCBIT. John reported he was part of the discussion for both Galien Township and Lake Township broadband inquiries. With us on Zoom at this meeting was Lincoln Township Supervisor Dick Stauffer and Berrien Township Supervisor Brian Bixby showing interest in applying for ARPA Broadband funds. We have also heard from Hagar Township, Baroda Township, Buchanan Township and a few others.

III. County's ARPA Project Funding Submission Process. Administrator Dissette reached out to Ben Fineman, Merit Network Michigan Moonshot Consultant and Principal at [Brightlink Solutions](#) to assist Berrien County as a broadband expert in reviewing ARPA Broadband Applications submitted to the County for sub-grantee funding.

a. Process Refinement. The process to review Broadband ARPA Sub-grantee Applications submitted to the County was discussed. Communities will have an opportunity to ask questions at the March 17th Berrien County Broadband ARPA Application Workshop. Overall, knowing that some projects may be more expensive than others, and a community may not have received a significant amount of ARPA funds, applications will additionally be reviewed and scored for project readiness, strong citizen support, serving the unserved and underserved areas, provider

partnership investment (or savings in mobilization strategy), all in accordance with sub-grantee review evaluation criteria and in accordance with [eligible ARPA expenditures](#). Priority will be given to the ready to go applications that meet eligibility requirements and availability of County funds.

Additional considerations for application processing and sub-grantee approval to use Berrien County ARPA funds for broadband deployment will likely include the following:

- The evaluation of an application and selection of an applicant for award will be based on the information submitted in the application.
- Signature of the application, attachments of supporting supporting, along with required documentation submitted with the application will expedite the approval of the project.
- Once an application is submitted and under review, failure to respond to each of the questions and requirements in the application, along with incorrect or false information, may adversely affect the evaluation of the grant application. This must be done correctly before disbursement of funds.
- Elaborate applications (such as expensive artwork, digital pop-ups) beyond that which is sufficient to present a complete and effective application, are not necessary.
- For application assistance, we have contracted with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC), to assist local units of government prepare and submit this grant application, or other grant opportunities as they become available.

b. Information Sharing. Formal and information presentations planned, along with document sharing discussed.

- i. **Formal In-Person Meeting Presentations.** At the March 17th BCBIT Meeting we will have a workshop to review the Berrien County Broadband ARPA Sub-grantee Application for local municipalities.
- ii. **Webinar(s).** As part of the March 17th ARPA Application Workshop, the meeting will be posted to Berrien County's [YouTube](#) site as a resource, and made available to those unable to attend in-person or virtually. Details for this event and presentation expectations will need to be discussed soon to allow for the behind-the-scenes magic to create itself.
- iii. **Documents Shared.** We will begin making a list of ISPs and who our contact is to help stream-line the project management process of broadband plan

development for application preparation and submission, and other relevant shared documents to assist our local communities in Berrien County with planning for and securing funds for broadband infrastructure deployment in their unserved and/or underserved areas within Berrien County.

Note: A [temporary BCBIT Page](#) with survey and StoryMap is available and accessible by navigating from [Berrien County's homepage](#) to this page. In addition, ARPA funding and the Broadband ARPA Application can be found [here](#). Our landing page for BCBIT is near the end of the approval process. There is a test page out, unviewable to the public. [CivicPlus](#), the technology platform we use for our e-government communication requires varying levels of security clearance and authorization.

- IV. **County Municipal Fiber.** Administrator Dissette and John Egelhaaf, SWMPC, had a meeting with [Merit Network](#) to discuss a County fiber-ring project as a direct response to unmet high-speed internet needs throughout Berrien County funded with the use of ARPA money. As it stands, and has become increasingly clear, the private market alone may not be able to solve the last mile of our connectivity issues when the cost/benefit analysis to an ISP company is subscriber revenue. We know the value of a connectivity solution is not just in the connectivity itself, but everything it allows. Digital disconnectedness divides the privileged and disadvantaged exacerbating social divisions and inequalities. MEC is rolling up the east side of the county. They are the most likely deployment partner.

- V. **GEO Software Report.** John Egelhaaf, SWMPC, reported that the GEO Software training is complete. His team is ready for the first projects to begin once the contract is in place. Expect a demonstration of the software's capabilities in about 4-weeks. GEO Software is the software package we can use to anticipate project costs by a particular location selected through a selection of data parameters ideally set as a cost estimate for total broadband deployment.

- VI. **StoryMap.** John Egelhaaf, SWMPC, reviewed the final draft of the StoryMap his organization has created. **Looks great!** This is ready to present to the Berrien County Board of Commissioners Committee of the Whole (COW) Meeting on February 24th.

The following is a link to the BCBIT StoryMap:

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/2ada22445343407b9314d3252a0a5406>

- VII. **Miscellaneous.** Next meeting is March 3rd.



**Berrien County
Broadband
Internet Task Force**

The Berrien County ARPA Broadband Grant Application Workshop

March 17, 2022, 12:30 PM

Berrien County Administration Center
701 Main Street, St. Joseph



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The Berrien County Internet Task Force (BCBIT) will host a workshop to discuss funding opportunities available through a new Berrien County Broadband Grant Program using American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds supporting broadband deployment. Community leaders from local units of government are encouraged to attend if you need additional dollars to support high-speed internet deployment to unserved and underserved areas in your community.

Learn about the eligible use of ARPA funds for broadband deployment, discuss potential broadband projects, review the broadband application process, and get answers to questions regarding using your ARPA funds and Berrien County ARPA funds supporting high-speed internet. RSVP bdissette@berriencounty.org for Zoom invite.