

Cracking the code on high-speed internet access: build out moving at lightning speed

Haywood County commissioners got an overview this week on the county's efforts to expand broadband, and it was a glowing report.

One of the board's top goals for the past few years has been expanding high-speed internet access across the county. Monday's report showed 75% of the households in the county now have broadband access. Another 19% — roughly 6,226 households — will have access in a year or so.

"That leaves 6% left to be served," said David Francis, the county's economic development director. "To you all's credit, you have bought into this and have done such a good job through the broadband committee. It's been fruitful. The broadband committee with the lead of Dr. Deborah Porto is recognized throughout the state."

Just over 2,000 households will remain unserved by high-speed internet — a far cry from just a few years ago thanks to \$11.5 million in federal, state and local dollars pushing out infrastructure.

"To get this down to 2,055 homes in such a short time, as a team we've done very well," Commissioner Tommy Long said.

For two decades, a digital divide left rural areas behind. The number of customers per mile didn't generate enough return on investment for private companies to justify the infrastructure cost.

That changed with the advent of federal and state grant money, along with local county funding, to subsidize the infrastructure cost. Francis explained the grants that had brought the county to this point — and the grants left to help complete the job.

There are three broadband providers in Haywood: Charter/Spec-

trum, Skyrunner and Zito Communications. Federal and state grants plus local county funding were channeled to the providers to build out the broadband infrastructure.

In all, \$10.5 million in federal and state grant funding has come to Haywood for high-speed internet expansion. The county has invested another \$1 million to bring projects to the finish line with local match. Of that \$1 million the county pitched in, \$425,000 came from federal Covid stimulus money, Francis explained.

"We really got a bang for our buck," Francis said. "We hear stories all the time on how it's gotten closer to us, and we can reach out and get it. There's more good stories happening."

Long, who attends many of the N.C. Association of County Commissioner gatherings, confirmed that Porto was well-known across the state for her work with broadband.

He recalled attending a meeting with the state IT staff and the top broadband providers in the state. Long mentioned he was from Haywood when chatting with one fella about county needs, and there was immediate recognition because of the broadband committee and Deborah Porto.

"She calls me on a regular basis and keeps her foot on the gas pedal," Long said in recounting the conversation. "In Raleigh, we were known."

Commission Chairman Kevin Ensley said he well remembered the days when people were constantly asking for high-speed internet and how the state had law tied the hands of counties to do anything.

"We've been able to work around

that to provide broadband for a lot of folks in our county," he said. "It reminds me of when they were trying to get power back in '20s and '30s."

Francis said the county took the same tack as rural electrification nearly a century ago by considering broadband a utility and by cultivating key public-private partnerships with providers and state officials.

Commissioner Jennifer Best recounted how she has long said the wheels of government move slowly, but noted it was good to see the broadband effort move along so well.

"This changes the ability to educate children and changes our property values," she said. "When I first came on in 2020, Dr. Porto very helpful to speak with me in language I understand. I appreciate that very much."

Francis recognized the members of the broadband committee: Porto, who serves as chairman, Hannah White, Joey Webb, Alicia Jack, Bill Driver, George Roland, Karen Hammett. Hannah White, Cheyenne Truitt, Kim Jackson, Russ Harris and Becca Scott.

Francis then surprised Porto with a special award honoring her service to the county.

"The person I talked with almost weekly, except for when she became a grandmother, was Dr. Porto," Francis said in recounting the project history. "The passion she has shown in this position. She has put so much time and effort into the broadband committee to make sure everybody has broadband, and we can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Haywood honors Dr. Porto. Your leadership has made broadband connection a reality."

Porto thanked everyone for the applause and kind words, as well as her colleagues on the broadband committee, the commissioners, the county GIS staff and Francis, who she said answered all her calls.

"We will get to those 2,000 people as future grants become available," she said. "Thank you for this awesome surprise, and we will continue working until we get it done."

