

Broadband Task Force Update

Hello Sublette County, this is Albert Sommers reporting to you from the Broadband Task Force meeting, which was held on September 16.

The Broadband Task Force was created by the Legislature's Management Council to push for rapid expansion of broadband services in Wyoming. In March 2020, the online resource *Broadband Now* ranked Wyoming among the ten worst states in the nation, based upon a rating system that included internet coverage, speed, and price. The COVID pandemic has demonstrated society's need for fast, reliable, and affordable internet service, because education, health service, shopping, and jobs have moved online. The pandemic simply sped up an already existing trend to move societal functions to the internet.

When the Broadband Task Force met earlier this summer, it developed a recommendation to the Governor to establish a temporary program to rapidly expand broadband internet access to Wyoming residents, utilizing CARES Act dollars. Congress had granted the State of Wyoming \$1.25 billion in CARES Act funding to help alleviate the impacts of the pandemic. Based upon Task Force recommendations, Governor Gordon developed the Connect Wyoming grant program for broadband providers who are able to quickly expand broadband in Wyoming. Due to restrictions in the federal CARES Act, states must spend these CARES Act dollars prior to December 31. The Feds' aggressive timeline hindered the ability of several broadband projects to be funded, but over \$60 million was granted to providers around the state of Wyoming, including in Sublette County.

On September 16, the Task Force heard a report from the Governor's office on the Connect Wyoming program. Visionary, a Wyoming company, was awarded about \$2.4 million to expand wireless broadband in Sublette County. I am hopeful this will supplement the good work that Union Telephone and other providers are doing in our county. Union did not apply for any of these funds, but stated in testimony September 16 that it would consider applying if the Feds extend their timelines for expenditure of CARES Act dollars.

Also at its September 16 meeting, the Task Force developed three recommendations to the Governor. Those recommendations are to fund more broadband projects on the ground this

year with CARES Act dollars, to fund additional broadband projects next year if the Feds extend the deadline for expenditure of CARES Act dollars, and to put out-facing routers in school parking lots for students and parents who may not have internet access in their homes. The Task Force continued to look at drafting legislation that would require short timelines for completing permitting of broadband projects in towns and counties. The Task Force will continue to develop legislation that would reduce the cost of leases on state land for broadband infrastructure, if a relationship can be made that the project will help connect more children to the internet.

The State of Wyoming has had a broadband grant program in place for three years, but nobody has accessed the \$10 million set aside, because of onerous conditions placed in statute. The Task Force will look at re-writing the program to make it more user friendly, and more available to the projects most needed. I will continue to strive for better broadband in Sublette County and Wyoming, because I believe it has become an essential service for all residents and is mandatory for economic development in Wyoming. I can be reached at albert@albertsommers.com with questions or comments.