



Testimony on Broadband Services

Presented to the Center for Rural Pennsylvania

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Thank you to Senator Yaw and the Center for Rural Pennsylvania for the opportunity to offer comments on the importance of broadband development and services.

Develop Tioga is the local certified economic development organization serving Tioga County, Pennsylvania. Our organization is focused on community and economic development efforts through the attraction of new business and industry, and the retention of existing businesses. We serve as a connection to resources that help start, expand, and promote businesses and enhance the quality of life in our communities.

When I started with our organization in July of 2018, one of the very first buzz words that resonated in many conversations in the most rural areas of our county as critical to community and economic development was "broadband". Depending on the conversation and location of the county we heard, "we need broadband", "we need enhanced broadband", "we need expanded broadband". In full reality depending on wherever you are and what you are doing at most anytime – you need access to quality connections to communicate and to access and provide information.

Two of the very first people we met with at that time were Craig Eccher and Bill Gerski to discuss Tri-Co Connection's innovative master plan. Obviously, their plan to bring enhanced services and availability over a three-county area has brought much excitement and anticipation. This last year that excitement turned into reality in Potter County and on behalf of our entire regional area we say – thank you for all you have done and continue to do.

During my initial outreach efforts, in late 2018 and early 2019, we asked our businesses and communities to identify what was working well and what was needed. Broadband access was a constant topic, especially in our most rural areas. Maple producers and farmers needing to use technology tools in the fields and woods, employers needing to have quick, reliable access both at their place of business and for employees working from home, contractors and entrepreneurs wanting to live and conduct business from their homes, students needing access for homework (and in 2020 to attend school remotely) and much more.

One part of our county that was specifically identified as a challenge was the area along the Route 49 corridor connecting Knoxville and Westfield. We are pleased to be able to share today that another provider, Blue Ridge Communications, in conjunction with PenTeleData, is currently in the testing phase of an expansion project anticipated to be implemented later this Spring. For at least 1,500 homes and the businesses in that area, this will have a significant positive impact.

As Tri-Co Connections, Blue Ridge Communications, PenTeleData and other providers continue to work to enhance and expand opportunities in our most rural areas, other planning efforts have been underway. In 2019, Develop Tioga formed a Broadband workgroup, a sub-committee of our Site Promotion workgroup. The

workgroup members currently include Tri-Co Connections, Blue Ridge Communications, PenTeleData, Tioga County GIS staff, and Potter County GIS/Panning office.

The group has focused on several key items related to broadband including establishing a map with FCC data that depicts service coverage areas in Tioga County. Scott Zubek, Tioga County GIS Director, worked with the FCC data to overlay it on a Tioga County map. This map is displayed on our website for use by site selectors and developers and can be overlaid with other key information for planning and site selection purposes.

The workgroup used the map as a starting point for additional efforts including the development of a Broadband survey, a joint project of Potter and Tioga counties. Commissioners of both counties have been extremely supportive of joint efforts to benefit our area. The survey, in conjunction with the map, was developed to gather additional information on how broadband is meeting the needs in our counties and identify any potential underserved or unserved areas. As Tom Freeman of Blue Ridge has often said, "if you look at maps that depict public water and sewer, you can pretty much identify areas that have broadband service for their needs - it is the other areas that then become the area we need to concentrate on."

The survey was focused on three specific needs: academic/school related, business, and personal/home use. Survey questions were developed to focus on topics such as what the user needed access for, how that access was meeting their needs, did they have options for service, and a link to conduct a speed test.

In late Fall 2020, the survey was launched in both on-line and paper formats. Over 1,100 responses have been received. At least 200 paper responses were completed by families through coordination with their school district or by individuals that responded to newspaper ads. The workgroup is currently in the process of reviewing the compiled responses. A summary will be prepared along with recommendations for next steps.

As we continue to move forward, it is critical to continue to enhance affordable, quality access throughout our area. Forums like this, conducted by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, are important in keeping the focus on the need to expand broadband, which is a vital component for the economic development of rural communities and counties.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments. We would be pleased to follow-up on any questions.