



Board of County Commissioners Agenda Request

86
Agenda Item #

Requested Meeting Date: February 23, 2021

Title of Item: Approve County Participation in Blandin Broadband Program

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> REGULAR AGENDA	Action Requested:	<input type="checkbox"/> Direction Requested
<input type="checkbox"/> CONSENT AGENDA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approve/Deny Motion	<input type="checkbox"/> Discussion Item
<input type="checkbox"/> INFORMATION ONLY	<input type="checkbox"/> Adopt Resolution (attach draft)	<input type="checkbox"/> Hold Public Hearing*

**provide copy of hearing notice that was published*

Submitted by: Jessica Seibert	Department: Administration
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Presenter (Name and Title): Jessica Seibert, County Administrator	Estimated Time Needed: 5 min.
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Summary of Issue:

Aitkin County has been invited to apply for the Blandin Foundation's Community Broadband Resources: Accelerate! program. Information is attached regarding the program. Staff will discuss with the Board and ask for support to participate. Discussion has been held with the Economic Development Committee who supports bringing the item to the Board.

Alternatives, Options, Effects on Others/Comments:

Recommended Action/Motion:
Approve County participation in the Community Broadband Resources: Accelerate! program.

Financial Impact:

Is there a cost associated with this request? Yes No

What is the total cost, with tax and shipping? \$

Is this budgeted? Yes No *Please Explain:*



Community Broadband Resources: *Accelerate!*

Broadband plays an essential role in the growth of rural Minnesota people and communities. Businesses need it to connect to customers, students need it to participate fully in their education, and we all need it to access information and resources that impact our everyday life. But the benefits of being connected are not yet shared by all Minnesotans -- and there are a number of reasons why.

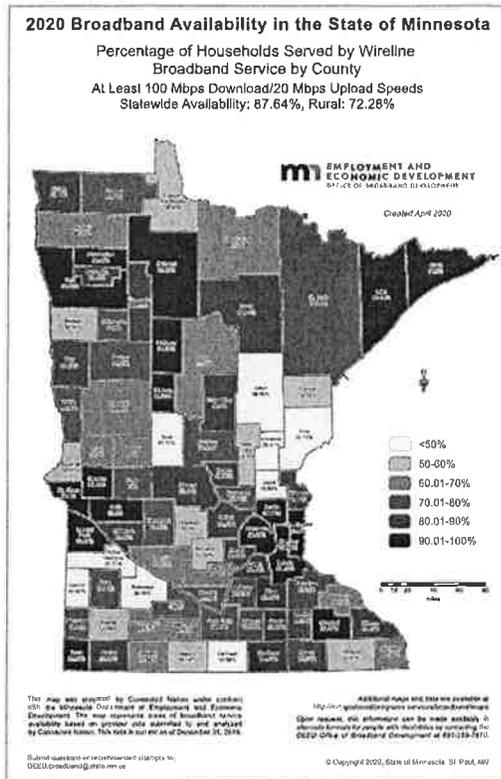
To stand alongside Minnesota's least-served counties and reservations, Blandin Foundation invites eligible communities to apply to an intensive program, **Community Broadband Resources (CBR): *Accelerate!***

Four communities will be selected to participate in the first cohort, which is expected to run mid-March through mid-June. The Foundation is prepared to select an additional 1-2 cohorts in 2021, based on interest levels. Communities will be selected based on preparedness as evidenced in their application materials, and level of need.

Application Timeline	
February 5	Application period opens
February 26	Applications due
March 5	Select and notify four cohort I communities

This virtual program will combine existing online content (webinar and conference recordings), cohort group learning opportunities, and individual county/tribal consultation. Participating communities will receive priority for Blandin Foundation's [Robust Network Feasibility Fund grants](#).

CBR: Accelerate! can only be effective if a dedicated leadership group commits to working on broadband access over a period of time. Likewise, feasibility studies have less value if local leaders do not have a plan to understand and follow through on the results. By empowering local leaders with knowledge, information, and a plan, communities will be well positioned to make progress on this significant challenge.



Eligible Communities:

The nine Minnesota counties where less than 50% of residents have access to internet service that meets the 2026 state broadband speed goal of 100 Mbps/20 Mbps are shown in yellow¹; the counties in light green have between 50-60% coverage. Several of Minnesota's Indian reservations that span multiple counties lack quality broadband.

https://mn.gov/deed/assets/county-wireline-only_tcm1045-255859.pdf

Highest Need (Less than 50 % coverage of 100/20 Mbps)

Kanabec	26.41%	Redwood	37.23%
Pine	39.17	Faribault	40.56
Yellow Medicine	46.22	Aitkin	46.32
Isanti	48.63	Todd	49.12

Next Highest Need (Between 50 and 60% coverage of 100/20 Mbps)

Traverse	50.97%	Carlton	52.46%
Fillmore	53.47	Murray	53.47
Lake of the Woods	54.66	Martin	55.46
Meeker	56.48	McLeod	57.82
Mille Lacs	59.40		

Highest Need Tribes

Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe
White Earth Nation	Upper Sioux Community

Several of the eligible communities have worked with Blandin Foundation over the years and still face broadband challenges. For infrastructure this important to the growth of rural communities, a 2nd or even 3rd community effort is worth a try!

¹ Lincoln County will move off this list when a countywide fiber to the home project is completed in 2021.

Program Details

Each community will recruit a team of at least eight participants to actively engage in the intensive fifteen-week program. The team should include representatives of government, chambers of commerce, education, health care, and technology companies, including, if desirable, interested existing or prospective Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

Launch: Orientation Session

March 17, 1:00-3:00 pm, Zoom: The four selected communities will gather to discuss each community's current situation, assets and barriers, possible community roles and hear from Blandin Foundation staff on broadband technology basics.

Phase One: Leadership Education

Teams of community members will complete a broadband development curriculum to gain a better understanding of planning processes, technology options, and business and financial models that support successful community broadband development programs. Broadband funding programs will also be highlighted. Leaders commit to watch a set of archived online webinars and participate in weekly follow-up, interactive, cross-community discussions (Fridays at 9am). Each community will have some time to during these sessions to plan their next activities.

Phase Two: Information Gathering

With assistance from Blandin Foundation, each community will review existing broadband maps and interview existing and prospective ISPs to fully understand existing and planned broadband services. To the extent possible, Blandin will provide contact information for providers.

Communities will be required to conduct surveys of local residents, businesses, and key anchor institutions like schools and health care providers. Surveys will include participation in the statewide broadband speed test. Communities will be expected to obtain participation of a minimum of 400 survey respondents.

Blandin staff will provide the survey instrument and participation link. Local sponsors will complete any necessary data entry of printed surveys and be responsible for all costs associated with printing, distribution, and collection of any printed surveys. Communities will have full access to all the survey data. Upon agreement of all parties, prospective ISP partners may be engaged as survey partners.

Phase 3: Opportunity Analysis and Next Steps

Blandin Foundation will facilitate two meetings, one week apart, with each community team to review the collected information and process outcomes. Next steps will be determined, which may include:

1. Proceed to develop a partnership model and finalize project funding with an identified, preferred ISP.

2. Proceed to a more formal feasibility study phase with engineering alternatives, pro forma business case development, and partnership identification and formation activities.
3. Hold off on further action.

Program Closeout: Report to the Community

Each community will present their findings, strategies, and next steps to the other participating communities for peer review and comment, and will also be required to present their completed work and going forward strategy to an appropriate local audience.

Phases, as detailed above, will overlap as shown in the schedule below.

Program Timeline	Meetings (Friday Cohort Check-ins: 9 - 10am)	Community Activity
Week 1 March 15	Orientation Meeting 3/17, 1-3pm Introductions, Broadband 101, full group and community break-out room discussions	Attend orientation meeting
Week 2	Friday Cohort Check-in 3/26 Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion	- Watch <i>Community Broadband Survey</i> webinar - Create survey plan
Week 3	Friday Cohort Check-in 4/2 Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion	- Watch <i>Broadband Mapping</i> webinar - Launch Survey w/ Speed Test
Week 4	Friday Cohort Check-in 4/9 Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion	- Watch <i>Setting the Vision</i> webinar - Map analysis
Week 5	Friday Cohort Check-in 4/16 Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion	- Watch <i>Communicating to Achieve your Broadband Vision</i> webinar - Interview existing and prospective providers
Week 6	Friday Cohort Check-in 4/23 Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion	- Watch <i>Ownership and Partnership Models</i> webinar - Finalize community communications plan
Week 7	Friday Cohort Check-in 4/30 Ad hoc discussion	- Complete: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Survey ▪ map review ▪ provider interviews ▪ community communications

Program Timeline	Meetings (Friday Cohort Check-ins: 9 - 10am)	Community Activity
Week 8	Friday Cohort Check-in 5/7 Ad hoc discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Complete: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Survey ▪ map review ▪ provider interviews ▪ community communications
Week 9	Friday Cohort Check-in 5/14 Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Watch <i>Feasibility Studies</i> webinar - Complete: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Survey ▪ map review ▪ provider interviews ▪ community communications
Week 10	Friday Cohort Check-in 5/21 Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Watch <i>Federal and State Programs</i> webinar - Complete: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Survey ▪ map review ▪ provider interviews ▪ community communications
Week 11	Friday Cohort Check-in 5/28 Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Watch <i>Local Broadband Finance Options</i> webinar - Complete: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Survey ▪ map review ▪ provider interviews ▪ community communications
Week 12	No cohort meeting	“What does it all mean?” planning session
Week 13	No cohort meeting	“What do we plan to do?” planning session
Week 14	Friday Cohort Check-in 6/18 Community Presentations!	
Week 15		Community Presentations in Home Community

Application

Applications are due February 26. Applications should be submitted to Mary Magnuson at memagnuson@blandinfoundation.org. Blandin Foundation will select and notify up to four applicants by March 5. Additional cohorts may be held later in 2021.

Team Leader Contact Information:

Name
Title
Organization
Phone
Email

Team Members:

Please list your team members and identify their area affiliations/roles. Please submit their letters of commitment – sample template provided below.

Team Members (Minimum of 8, additional members welcome.)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

Application Questions:

1. Who will lead this effort? Who will provide staff support?
2. Please describe any previous broadband planning efforts. What was the result?
3. What affect is the lack of broadband having on your area?
4. Please describe how broadband is a community priority

Sample Letter of Commitment:

Dear Bernadine Joselyn,

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the **CBR: Accelerate!**. As [name, affiliation/title, organization], I recognize the importance of improved broadband infrastructure to the future success of my organization and our area. I commit to personally investing several hours per week for approximately fifteen weeks in a concentrated effort to bring better broadband to our area. I also understand that this initial period may only be the beginning of this broadband initiative. After all, if it was easy, it would have been done by now.

[Name]

[Title]

[Date]