Rush County

Digital Inclusion Plan

2020-2025

Given that information technology is becoming an asset for communities that wish to strengthen and expand their economic opportunities, having access to broadband and enhancing people's knowledge and application of this valuable resource is vital to the social and economic well-being of these places. Any community that finds itself on the wrong side of the digital divide is risking being left behind and facing a deteriorating quality of life.

For these reasons, Rush County formed a broadband task force in the spring of 2019. This task force delineated the following vision and mission to help guide its work:

VISION
Every home/business in Rush County has affordable, adequate, and reliable internet access and be able to fully participate in a digital economy and society.

MISSION
Work with providers, community leaders, organizations, and residents to improve internet access and digital literacy throughout Rush County.

The task force is comprised of 19 members representing county/city government, schools, local economic development organizations, community foundations, farm organizations, utilities, banks, student, private citizens, nonprofits/social service groups, and attorneys.

As a product of their work, the task force produced a plan that encompasses the following series of goals and objectives:

Goal 1:

Improve/upgrade broadband connectivity/access throughout the county in multiple phases

Objective 1a: Gather relevant data to assess broadband infrastructure in the county.

Task 1a1: Analyze public data regarding broadband connectivity (e.g., FCC Form 477, Census ACS, Microsoft, MLab, Broadband Now, etc.)

Task 1a2: Design and conduct a household survey to validate existing broadband data and document demand aggregation.

Task 1a3: Engage in one-on-one conversations with providers to learn their broadband infrastructure footprint as well as potential future investments.

Objective 1b: Analyze data gathered in objective 1a and in concert with stakeholder input, identify broadband investment priority areas (BIPAs) in county.

Task 1b1: Define level of service (e.g., minimum advertised speeds, technology, etc.) expected in BIPAs (areas identified as first-in-line to make broadband investments).

Task 1b2: Document number of households, businesses, farmsteads, and farm fields within BIPAs that may subscribe to the service.

Task 1b3: Consider socioeconomic characteristics of BIPAs to anticipate potential adoption barriers such as affordability, age, and lack of computing devices. Document areas identified during this task to be targeted by additional digital inclusion strategies (refer to Goal #2).

Objective 1c: Draft a request for qualifications (RFQ) or request for proposals (RFP) from providers that includes BIPAs, level of service expected, and discounted or tiered services.

Objective 1d: Analyze responses to RFQ or RFP, identify, and align potential government incentives to support the provider responses.

>*Task 1d1:* Once cost of investment is known from providers to upgrade or build broadband infrastructure in the broadband investment priority areas, government incentives will need to identified and outlined. These may include dig-once policies, streamlining easements and right-of-ways, tax credits, waiver tax abatements, repurpose existing economic development funds, and leveraging state/federal grants.

Objective 1e: Announce RFP or RFQ that will move forward; establish a clear timeline for buildout or upgrade. Repeat process as needed until goal 1 is achieved.

Objective 1f: Install free Wi-Fi hotspots in strategic community areas: downtown, parks, etc. in addition to mapping existing Wi-Fi hotspots (e.g., fast food restaurants, book stores, etc.)

Objective 1g: Start a Wi-Fi hotspot lending program coordinated by the library or other nonprofits in the community, targeting areas most in need in addition to BIPAs.

Goal 2:

Improve quality and ownership of computing devices throughout the county

Objective 2a: Inventory businesses and organizations in the community that would be interested in donating equipment.

Objective 2b: Identify an organization or organizations willing to manage both the equipment and the volunteers and implement a device loan/sale program. This loan/sale program should also require completion of digital literacy workshops prior to receiving digital equipment.

Objective 2c: Recruit and maintain a core group of tech-savvy volunteers willing to help reformat donated equipment.

Objective 2d: Target previously identified BIPAs (see objective 1b) in the community that would benefit the most from a device loan/sale program. In addition and with proper safeguards in place, reach out to organizations that administer social programs in your community to help identify residents in your community that may benefit from a device loan/sale program.

Objective 2e: Research and apply for grants to supply devices to underserved in community.

Goal 3:

Improve digital skills and literacy among multiple groups in the community

Objective 3a: Inventory anchor institutions and other relevant organizations (e.g., libraries, bookstores, schools, community colleges, churches, etc.) with access to fast internet and devices that could be positioned to host digital literacy workshops and/or provide public access to devices and internet.

Objective 3b: Inventory existing digital literacy workshops ongoing in the community to identify gaps and niches to be filled including but not limited to efforts conducted by schools, nonprofits, community colleges, local economic development organizations, etc.

Objective 3c: In partnership with other stakeholders involved in digital literacy or skill training (e.g., community colleges, workforce development programs, schools, churches, etc.) draft a plan that, among other things, identifies additional curriculum to be taught, locations to be used, frequency of the training offerings, along with volunteers and/or instructors available who can conduct the trainings.

Goal 4:

Integrate digital inclusion strategies into community and economic development efforts

Objective 4a: Assess the community's online presence and reputation; draft and implement a plan to improve community's online presence and proactively manage online reputation, including expanding online services and digital engagement with residents.

Objective 4b: Realign economic development efforts to 1) provide support to existing businesses and their online presence and competitiveness; 2) become a "remote work" friendly community; 3) ensure current and future workforce has both relevant digital and soft skills.

Objective 4c: Conduct annual "hackathons" where local students or residents compete to develop apps or online services to improve city services, community responsiveness, and/or quality of life in general.

Objective 4d: Develop and implement an entrepreneurship ecosystem (e.g., community support, funding including crowdfunding, locations such as maker or co-working spaces, etc.) with an emphasis on developing products and services more aligned to a digital economy (e.g., app development, online services, consulting, data analysis, etc.)

Objective 4e: Identify and secure a facility in the community to serve as a regional data innovation hub that can be engaged in a variety of activities, such as but not limited to: host digital literacy/skill workshops, serve as a co-working and/or maker space, nest teleworkers, open space for toddlers, etc.

Objective 4f: Support precision agriculture and farm-to-table programs among community farmers.

Objective 4g: Assess extent of homework gap in partnership with school district; identify resources and tools to address this gap, leveraging in part resources and information gathered in goals #2 and #3.