

June 11, 2019

To: Broadband Enthusiasts  
From: Wm. Sederburg  
Re: Update on West Next Generation Network (WNGN)

I thought you might appreciate a brief update on the WNGN project. It is hard to believe this all started three years ago when Hub leadership, including Jack Cecil, Janice Brumit, Mack Pearsall, Dave Brown and others created a task force that led to the creation of WNGN.

While things have not happened as quickly or as extensively as we would have liked, thanks to the involvement of Land of Sky Regional Council (Sara Nichols and Erica Anderson), Hunter Goosmann (ERC Broadband), Stagg Newman (volunteer consultant), and many others we have made significant progress.

As you recall, WNGN had two phases. Phase one is with six cities near available fiber. Municipal managers John Connet (Hendersonville), Jonathan Kanipe (Biltmore Forest), Mark Biberdorf (Fletcher) and Alison Alexander (Laurel Park) have been strong leaders in this project. Allison as recently moved on to be a manager of a larger city in South Carolina.

Phase two is the more rural parts of the Land of Sky region. Sara Nichols of Land of Sky has involved numerous county and municipal officials. We have also added another activity involving UNCA students. It is being led by Stagg Newman.

Here is a summary of the WNGN project.

- Phase One -
  - In December, public hearings were held in Hendersonville, Laurel Park, Fletcher and Biltmore Forest introducing RiverStreet Networks Inc. to the four communities. Approximately 100 people attended each hearing. These meetings showed our local leaders and providers the public interest for improving broadband services
  - As a result of these hearings, RiverStreet Networks will begin a marketing campaign within the next month, to assess the public's receptivity to contracting with RiverStreet Networks for broadband services. If interest is significant enough, an engineering feasibility study will be conducted in partnership with the city or cities.
  - A meeting with civic leaders was held in Waynesville for RiverStreet Networks to meet key players from both the city and county. One topic of conversation was whether local electricity providers are interested in using system resources (poles, etc.) for broadband.
  - In Asheville, we placed the initiative on "hold" until the new city manager was in place. I have met with Manager Campbell. She is very interested in

expanding broadband in Asheville, particularly in underserved disadvantaged areas

- We are hearing from some of our Phase I communities about significant broadband upgrades and expanded services from current providers to their area. I believe part of this is in response to the potential of other providers entering the region.
- Phase Two -
  - Land of Sky Regional Council received an Appalachian Regional Commission grant to work with member counties to survey residents, map certain assets, and encourage county broadband committees. The grant ends soon with reports available in the next few days. Sara Nichols from Land of Sky and Hunter Goosmann from ERC have led the effort. Contact Sara if you want a copy or link to the reports ([sara@landofsky.org](mailto:sara@landofsky.org).)
  - We are in the final stages of gathering data for this project. To date we have about 6000 responses from the region! This information will help drive provider participation and potential grant funding opportunities. Here is a link to the survey. <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/LOSREZ>
  - As part of this effort, Land of Sky organized and hosted a Broadband 101 session with approximately 50 local leaders learning about state and local efforts to expand broadband. The Director of the State Office of Information Technology, Jeff Sural, and the state Broadband Infrastructure Office coordinator for western NC, Keith Conover, were two of many presenters.
  - Local school districts (Asheville, Buncombe County, Henderson County, Madison County and Transylvania County) have distributed information about participating in the broadband survey to the parents of students. Special thanks to everyone involved.
  - Under the leadership of Buncombe County Commission Chair Newman, Buncombe county has marketed the survey to county residents, complete with posters, social media and direct marketing.
  - Attention is shifting to legislative and federal funding sources. Our local representatives have been successful in getting funding (\$10 million state-wide) for the GREAT legislation. However, that funding is limited to Tier 1 counties, none of which are in our region. Federal conversation about increased funding for rural broadband is also looking positive, such as the USDA Reconnect Grants and Loans.
- UNCA Student Project

- With support from UNCA and two local donors, three students have been hired to develop an app to use in creating an evaluation of what is currently available in identified zones. The state office of broadband services (thanks to Keith Conover) is assisting with the project and insuring that everything is done according to proper protocol.
- Thanks to RiverStreet, UNCA the students have visited their headquarters and will visit the fiber manufacturing facility in Hickory, NC. These are great learning experiences.
- The student project may be expanded to other communities if we find it useful.

As we continue to make progress. Four observations stand out in my mind:

- **Improved broadband service is remains the single most important game changer for the region that affects all parts of society: health care, education, economic growth, etc.**
- By necessity, we have focused more on incremental gains instead of a comprehensive “gigabit” approach for everyone.
- Many parts of our region face significant deficits in service, including within urban areas. The digital divide is likely to increase.
- The issue of better broadband service has helped build collaboration among local leaders.

If you have any questions or comments, please let me know. Look forward to getting an invitation for a fall meeting to talk about the future of broadband in the region!

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