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RESOLUTION NO. _____

SUPPORT EXPANDING ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE AND RELIABLE INTERNET FOR ALL RESIDENTS OF WHATCOM COUNTY

WHEREAS, internet is an essential utility and critical infrastructure often requiring significant public investment; and

WHEREAS, many communities within Whatcom County do not have adequate access to affordable, reliable, high-speed internet, as defined by the Washington State Broadband Office’s goals established under [RCW 43.330.536](#); and

WHEREAS, this lack of access has created a digital divide and exacerbated inequities in rural and already unserved and underserved communities; and

WHEREAS, many people rely upon stable internet for meeting basic needs such as working, operating a business, attending school, accessing healthcare, or purchasing goods and services remotely; and

WHEREAS, Whatcom County is a supportive partner with the Port of Bellingham (Port) and Public Utility District No. 1 of Whatcom County (PUD) in the effort to expand broadband throughout Whatcom County; and

WHEREAS, Whatcom County has invested millions of dollars in matching funds for high-priority Port and PUD broadband projects throughout rural Whatcom County; and

WHEREAS, on April 15, 2023, Whatcom County entered into an interlocal agreement (Contract #202304010) formalizing its partnership with the Port and PUD; and

WHEREAS, the interlocal agreement provides a framework to coordinate and collaborate, including the establishment of a joint broadband steering committee to facilitate and provide joint decision-making on a publicly owned rural broadband fiber network; and

WHEREAS, the PUD has expressed willingness to provide technical expertise and assistance in the planning, development, and operation of a geographic information systems (GIS) broadband mapping tool; and

WHEREAS, communication, coordination, and collaboration locally, regionally, and across the state is key to advocating for and accessing state and federal funding opportunities to expand internet access; and

WHEREAS, Whatcom County participates in SWISS (Snohomish, Whatcom, Island, Skagit and San Juan County), a group facilitated by the Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC); and

WHEREAS, SWISS provides an opportunity for regional coordination and collaboration on several shared priorities including expanding equitable, affordable access to

1 quality, reliable, high-speed broadband internet, especially in underserved, unserved, and
2 distressed communities; and
3

4 **WHEREAS**, SWISS and WSAC have facilitated opportunities for counties, including
5 Whatcom County, to provide feedback to state and federal leaders, including the
6 Washington State Broadband Office (WSBO) and National Telecommunications and
7 Information Administration (NTIA), and participate in the Broadband Equity, Access, and
8 Deployment (BEAD) program process; and
9

10 **WHEREAS**, in addition to local and regional coordination, Whatcom County can take
11 steps internally to help facilitate opportunities to expand internet access; and
12

13 **WHEREAS**, establishing policy and processes that facilitate notification and
14 coordination of construction activities, including utility installation, during planned road
15 construction projects and permitted residential, commercial, and industrial development can
16 help streamline processes, increase efficiency, minimize excavation on roads, reduce costs,
17 and expand access to affordable and reliable internet for all residents of Whatcom County;
18 and

19 **WHEREAS**, the Whatcom County Council supports any additional resources that may
20 be needed to successfully develop and manage these policies and processes, recognizing
21 increased access to affordable and reliable internet as a great investment.
22

23 **NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that the Whatcom County Council supports
24 the County taking the following actions to support internet for all in Whatcom County:
25

- 26 1. Amend Whatcom County Code Chapter 12.24 Franchise Requirements to include
27 notification and coordination of construction activities, including utility installation,
28 within County Rights-of-Way between Whatcom County, franchise grantees, and all
29 interested utility providers;
30
- 31 2. Develop a notification system to inform all interested parties of opportunities to
32 coordinate construction activities, including utility installation, within County Rights-
33 of-Way, planned road construction projects, and permitted residential, commercial,
34 and industrial development;
35
- 36 3. Recognize internet as a utility in all relevant policy, planning, regulatory, and
37 permitting documents and processes, including but not limited to, in the
38 Comprehensive Plan and in permit review and site plan check lists for development
39 as applicable;
40
- 41 4. Continue using EDI funds to leverage state and federal funds for internet
42 infrastructure, prioritizing public, open access mid- and last mile projects that
43 advance digital equity and rural internet connectivity;
44
- 45 5. Partner with the PUD, Port, and other relevant parties to develop a multilayered GIS
46 map that can inventory current internet availability, identify high-priority areas that
47 align with the County's Comprehensive Plan, planned road construction projects, and
48 permitted development, inform the County's role in facilitating notification and
49 coordination, and track utility infrastructure installed as a result of these actions;
50

- 1 6. Actively participate in local, regional, and statewide coordination efforts, such as with
2 the joint broadband steering committee, SWISS, WSAC, and the Regional Broadband
3 Action Team, to proactively identify and evaluate opportunities to collaboratively
4 improve internet access regionally and throughout Whatcom County.
5

6
7 **ADOPTED** this ____ day of _____, 2024.
8

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10
11 ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WASHINGTON

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13 _____
14 Dana Brown-Davis, Clerk of the Council

Barry Buchanan, Council Chair

15
16
17 APPROVED AS TO FORM:

18
19 _____
20 Civil Deputy Prosecutor
21

DRAFT