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**INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM**

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**TO:** TYLER SCHROEDER

**FROM:** GINA STARK

**SUBJECT:** SCHOOL DISTRICTS DISTANT LEARNING REIMBURSEMENT

**DATE:** SEPTEMBER 10, 2020

**CC:** RUD BROWNE AND SATPAL SIDHU

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**Background**

The County Council recognized the critical need for connectivity and equipment assistance for our School Districts as a response to COVID-19 and requirements for distance learning. The County has allocated approximately \$900,000 to help school district in this effort.

The Port of Bellingham has been working in collaboration with Councilman Rud Browne, Superintendents and IT managers, Internet service providers (ISP), and cell carriers to determine connectivity options and costs associated with them.

The intent of this memo is to lay down the foundations for the reimbursement of those costs to the school districts and the necessary agreements with ISP to connect families. In addition to highlighting what some of those costs currently are.

Due to a recent RFQ proposal issued by the Office of the Superintendent the school districts have not been able to move forward on connecting families with services provided by Comcast, WAVE, and Zply, our three biggest carriers. This has not negated the fact that families still needed to be connected prior to the start of the school year. As a solution many of the school districts have order hotspots from the three major carriers: AT&T, T-Mobile, and Verizon. Each of these carriers are offering special pricing specific to student distant learning.

The current count and cost incurred from the schools:

School District	Verizon	AT&T	T-Mobile	Total Cost Annual
Lynden		200		\$137,148
Blaine		75	100	\$57,151.20
Ferndale		100		\$33,600
Meridian	20		100	\$43,197.60

Nooksack	TBD	TBD	TBD	
Mt. Baker	TBA	TBD	TBD	\$96,000

**Distribution model**

Early in the process I meet with all of the superintendents regarding how should the funding be divided per school district. It was agreed that each district would be funded based on need of unconnected families. For instance, is if Lynden had 200 unconnected families and Blaine had 300 then Blaine would get a higher percentage of funding. A few of our schools such as Nooksack and Mt. Baker are doing additional surveys to determine how many families are without connectivity. I would like to propose reimbursing some of the schools and keeping some of the funding in reserve for those districts that are still lagging in finalizing their counts and determining the best way to connect their families.

Also, the initial count shows a pretty even distribution of hotspots across the schools. If each district is allocated \$130,000 that should cover their hotspots for one year.

**Funding priorities**

Fund each of the school districts based on their connectivity need whether through an ISP or mobile hotspot for one school year worth of service. Currently the amount of CARES funding is enough to fund the current amount of hotspots deployed. See draft budget.

In addition, we have been working with the local provider PoGo Zone which is a small ISP provider who specializes in providing service to rural communities. Pogo Zone has worked with us and our schools to provide a competitive pricing for their services.

I propose using a portion of the CARES funding to pre-pay for a certain amount of connectivity’s provided by PoGo Zone. Based on analysis of address in each school district PoGo Zone can provide service to over 100 households. Approving PoGo Zone for at least \$130,000 worth of connection will enable them to work with the school districts and family to get connected. It is estimated they would be able to connect approximately 200 students. Included with this memo is a draft estimate of cost provided by PoGo Zone (see attached).

Second, fund each school district as much as possible for the purchase of laptops. Many of our schools have diverted funding from other areas of their budget to acquire the necessary purchases this will enable them to backfill these costs.

Finally, we know that our two largest providers, Comcast and Ziplly, will be awarded contracts by OSPI however this is not an infinite amount of funding from OSPI. There is still a possibility we will have families in Whatcom county who qualify for the special pricing offered by these carries but OSPI has run out of funding. It is proposed that funding be left in reserve to cover these future connections.

The cost to the school districts far outweighs the original allocation from the County Council. The School Districts and Superintendent are very grateful to Councilmember Browne and the rest

of the County Council. However, if there is additional funding available for this purpose it would continue to help the many families in need.

Reimbursement Entity	Amount
Blaine	\$130,000
Ferndale	\$130,000
Lynden	\$130,000
Meridian	\$130,000
Mt. Baker	\$130,000
Nooksack	\$130,000
PoGo Zone	\$ 130,000
Total	\$910,000