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## MEMO

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**TO:** WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL  
**FROM:** GINA STARK, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROJECT MANAGER  
**SUBJECT:** WHATCOM COUNTY BROADBAND SE BLAINE PROJECT  
**DATE:** SEPTEMBER 12, 2023  
**CC:** BROADBAND COMMITTEE

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The Port of Bellingham works in partnership to build open access fiber networks that will be leased by Internet Service Providers (ISPs) who can provide quality, affordable broadband service to the end customer. The Whatcom County Broadband Project's strategy:

- Identify areas where service speeds are at or below the state or federal standard of 100/20 Mbps
- Fill in the gaps where no other private ISP is willing to fill
- Work with our local partners
- Build open access networks

The Port of Bellingham due to grants, investments from the County and the Port have been able to fund three projects in rural Whatcom county that total 118 miles of fiber and can provide service to over 2,000 homes. The PUD was recently awarded a grant to build fiber to the premise 1200 community members in Point Robert. However, there are still several thousand residents that are unserved and underserved in Whatcom County.

The Biden Administration passed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 which created the Broadband Access Equity and Deployment Funding (BEAD). The BEAD funding will be administered and allocated to each state by the National Telecommunication Information Administration (NTIA). Before each state is allocated their allotted distribution several plans and polices must be created and submitted to NTIA. Currently, the Washington State Broadband Office is not expected to collect any of the BEAD funding until 2025. At that point it will only be 20% of the full amount and WSBO is obligated to distribute the funding to high distressed and low-income areas. Whatcom county is not designated as a distressed county and therefore will not likely be able to access this first tranche of funding. The remaining funding is expected to be released to the state in late 2025 meaning after the project and grant process Whatcom county won't likely to receive funds until 2026 at the earliest.

The Broadband Steering Committee has defined project area currently ready to be built and would like to request from the County Council their continued partnership and be able to use the identified ARPA

funding for broadband to reach the unserved and underserved community members with quality and affordable broadband. Community members in our most rural areas need coverage today and can be served by ARPA funding which need to be spent by 2026. We also understand even with the investment of BEAD funding for broadband the need still exceeds the investment especially in rural areas.

Currently, the identified a fiber to the premise project is located south east of Blaine. Not including driveways, the project is a total of nearly 20 middle miles with almost half of it being located underground and passes 453 homes. The total cost of the project is \$3,986,033.88. Below is the total budget breakdown:

Item	Cost
Engineering and permitting + 20% contingency	\$400,000
Permitting	\$123,615
Construction+20% contingency	\$ 3,566,033.88
Total project cost	\$3,986,033.88

This is a project that will make a significant difference in many community members lives who currently have service of 23/3 Mbps or less. Whatcom County has the ability to fund this project with the identified ARPA funding and without your investment this project will not be realized. The Broadband Steering committee looks forward to a continued partnership with the County.