

August 8, 2023

Commissioner Bobby Briscoe
Commissioner Ken Bell
Commissioner Michael Shepard
Rob Fix, Executive Director
Gina Stark, Economic Development Project Manager

Port of Bellingham
1801 Roeder Avenue
Bellingham, WA 98225

Dear Commissioners, Mr. Fix, and Ms. Stark:

The Port of Bellingham has played a lead role in assessing – and meeting – broadband needs in Whatcom County, with Whatcom County becoming a critical funding partner over the last several years. We recognize the need for expanded rural broadband to promote equity and economic development in our community.

In October 2022, the County Council, the Port of Bellingham, and the Whatcom Public Utility District had lengthy discussions regarding additional [proposed rural broadband projects](#) in Northern and Eastern Whatcom County. Following those discussions, on January 10, 2023, the County Council approved \$4,000,000 in matching funds to accompany the Port's 2023 \$12,000,000 funding application to the Washington State Broadband Office. This level of matching funds went above the Broadband Office's 10% requirement in order to increase the chance of success and in recognition of the community need. The Port's proposed project would build 187 miles of fiber, passing approximately 1,384 homes, costing approximately \$2,900 in local dollars for each home passed. During these discussions, Council indicated a desire to continue discussion on the source of the \$4,000,000 in local matching funds.

We understand that the Port was not awarded its requested grant from the Washington State Broadband Office. With the changing circumstances, we want to assure the Port that the County is still committed to this large rural broadband investment. Given the federal timeline requirements for contracting and expending under the ARPA grant, we do want to make you aware that at this time we believe Economic Development Investment (EDI) funds are the best source to provide the \$4M in matching funds. This will allow the Port time to secure outside resources to leverage these dollars, as presented in its original funding request, and will allow the County to maximize community benefit with the broad eligible uses of the ARPA grant. We would defer to the EDI Board to consider the project specifics and make a recommendation to Council regarding an award.

Whatcom County believes broadband investments should be a partnership with other levels of government, the private sector, and individual homeowners. We are eager to support the Port with advocacy to the Washington State Broadband Office, the Washington State Legislature, or other entities to ensure continued possibility of state and federal investment for rural Whatcom County broadband.

We appreciate the Port of Bellingham's leadership regarding broadband and digital equity in Whatcom County and look forward to further discussions on how to meet this community need.

Sincerely,