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WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL

October 4, 2022

Director Mark Vasconi
Washington State Broadband Office
Washington State Department of Commerce
P.O. Box 42525
Olympia, WA 98504-2525
wsbo@commerce.wa.gov

Dear Director Vasconi:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment as the Washington State Broadband Office (WSBO) prepares for the final round of American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) funding. These funds have been incredibly important to the residents of Whatcom County as we work collaboratively with the Port of Bellingham and the Public Utility District No. 1 of Whatcom County (PUD) to deploy affordable high-speed internet to hundreds of end users including households, public buildings, schools, tribal facilities, and private businesses across Whatcom County. The Whatcom County Council remains committed to partnering on broadband issues and appreciates the opportunity to weigh in on a few of these important issues.

Open Access:

~~The Whatcom County Council~~ Whatcom County believes open access is key to any publicly funded broadband project. It should be a required threshold criterion for all segments of a broadband network, it should be open from the service date and in perpetuity, and it should be nondiscriminatory. We feel very strongly about this. Open access ensures fairness in pricing and gives consumers choice in services that best fit their needs. As we continue to appropriate local funds, we are committed to ensuring open access in all present and future broadband projects.

Matching Contributions:

Since 2019, Whatcom County has provided approximately \$42,750,000 of matching funds from the Economic Development Investment (EDI) program, ~~and has plans to allocate another \$4 million from local ARPA funds for broadband projects.~~ ~~The Whatcom County Council~~ Whatcom County wants to help our broadband partners be as competitive as possible and plans to will continue to allow for additional consider requests for matching funds; however, we think it is important that our availability of funds, or lack thereof, not impede our partners' ability to qualify for state funds. This is even more important in rural counties like Whatcom, where the distances are large and population densities are thin, causing the capital outlays on the to be expensive side per household served. As such, we support matching contributions be a scoring criterion, but not a requirement.

Digital Equity:

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified gaps in access as people were asked to stay home and rely on internet access for school, work, health care, groceries, safety information, and other essential needs. Many households throughout Whatcom County, often low-income and rural, remain under- or unserved with little or no access to affordable high-speed internet. ~~The Whatcom County Council~~ Whatcom County is committed to supporting, and prioritizing, broadband projects that incorporate and demonstrate digital equity, and think it should be a consideration for state funding as well.

State funds are critical to helping our broadband partners deploy affordable, high-speed internet throughout our county. We appreciate the WSBO's willingness to consider our perspective in these decisions.

Sincerely,

Whatcom County Council _____ Whatcom County Executive