

# **The Florida Broadband Initiative**

## ***A Call to Action***

**“Every household and business in Florida should have access to  
affordable, reliable, high-speed Internet Services.”**

**This document represents the support from the leadership of the Small County Coalition**

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**Compiled for consideration by  
Chris Doolin, Consultant to the Small County Coalition**

**11-10-20**

# **The Florida Broadband Initiative**

**“Every household and business in Florida should have access to affordable, reliable, high-speed Internet Services.”**

This document is compiled in an effort to urge support for achieving the goal of providing access to reliable, affordable, high-speed internet service to every household and business throughout the State of Florida. The document underscores the imperative of moving forward with a collaborative strategic plan that addresses the internet access needs of the public, supports the ability of the private sector to provide expanded internet services, and engage governmental entities at the Federal, State and Local level. This goal of universal internet services requires coordination, cooperation, and focus to ensure that all assets are utilized, and additional assets solicited to target areas that are underserved. The document uses as its base HB 969, the recent legislation passed by the Florida Legislature, that tasks the Department of Economic Opportunity with several directives. The leadership of the Small County Coalition are committed to support this effort and will work in a collaborative fashion to achieve the stated objectives and measure progress. We are hopeful that other organizations and entities will join us in working with the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity in fulfilling the requirements of HB 969.

Unfortunately, there are major digital gaps in rural Florida counties. The absence of reliable and affordable high-speed internet service in rural areas is well documented and significantly impacts opportunity. Without broadband services, communities will be prevented from achieving the high quality of life that is considered the foundation of prosperity and impede economic growth

More than ever before, the need for reliable and affordable high-speed internet access is essential for Rural Florida to meet the challenges within their communities. These challenges include the following -

- the ability for all schoolchildren to have access to the best educational opportunities, including the ability to effectively engage in virtual education.
- the ability for people in rural areas to access telemedicine to improve health outcomes for its residents, and to provide access without demanding travel and transportation.
- the ability for the public to effectively access public safety communications and programs to ensure rapid communication with the public and among law enforcement agencies; and,
- the ability for communities to maintain and expand business opportunities, to stimulate job growth and engage in innovative technologies that are required for a vibrant economy.

The goal of providing reliable, affordable, high-speed internet is contingent on several factors –

- Up-to-date mapping to define where gaps exist;
- Partnerships between the private and public sector to outline the best approaches for the local/and regional communities;
- Clear understanding of what support will be needed to allow for private sector expansion of service where the digital gap exist;
- Collaboration with stakeholders that can assist in strategic input and implementation;
- Establishing metrics to measure current conditions and measure progress;
- Effective targeting of current resources to ensure collaboration on the overall goal;
- Identifying and utilizing local strategies that have proven successful; and
- A coordinated effort to secure additional resources to address identified targets.

## **The Current Situation**

Fixed and mobile broadband services provide access to employment, education, entertainment, and health care opportunities. Communities that lack broadband access have difficulty attracting new capital investment. While Florida's urban areas are served at a fixed broadband coverage rate of 98 percent, its rural areas are served at a rate of 75.2 percent. This disparity is caused primarily by high per-unit construction costs required to build broadband infrastructure across larger swaths of rural geographic areas.

**Florida's Broadband Program** - In 2009, the Legislature authorized the Department of Management Services (DMS) to work collaboratively with Enterprise Florida, state agencies, local governments, private businesses, and community organizations to:

- Assess the needs for broadband Internet service and develop data and maps that provide a baseline assessment of the availability and speed of broadband service throughout Florida.
- Create a strategic plan to increase use of broadband Internet service in Florida.
- Build local technology planning teams representing, among others, libraries, schools, colleges and universities, local health care providers, private businesses, community organizations, economic development organizations, local governments, tourism, parks and recreation, and agriculture; and
- Encourage the use of broadband Internet service, especially in rural, unserved, and underserved areas of the state through grant programs.
- DMS was also authorized to apply for and accept federal funds, as well as gifts and donations from individuals, foundations, and private organizations, for these purposes.

In 2009, the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications Information Administration (NTIA) launched the State Broadband Initiative (SBI) to implement two federal laws, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and the Broadband Data Improvement Act of 2008. According to the NTIA's SBI website, twelve separate entities within Florida were awarded grants totaling \$183.7 million for broadband infrastructure, sustainable adoption, and public computer center projects. Among those grants, DMS was awarded a total of \$8,877,028. In 2012, the Legislature passed a law transferring the state's broadband program from DMS to the Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) and designating DEO as the single state entity to receive and manage all federal SBI funds. By its terms, this law would become effective only if the U.S. Department of Commerce approved the transfer of the existing federal SBI grant from DMS to DEO. This approval was never provided; thus, the program remains under DMS. After depletion of the remaining SBI grant funds, the state broadband program has been unfunded and dormant.

**Federal Broadband Initiatives** - In January 2020, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) established the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (Fund) to fund the deployment of broadband networks in rural America over the next decade. The program will consist of two phases. Using data from the FCC's previous mapping efforts, the first phase will begin later this year and will make available up to \$16 billion to target census blocks that are wholly unserved with fixed broadband speeds of at least 25 megabits per second (Mbps) downstream and 3 Mbps upstream (25/3 Mbps). Using more precise data to be developed through a new FCC mapping effort, the second phase will make available at least \$4.4 billion to target census blocks where some locations lack access to 25/3 Mbps broadband. In addition, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), through its ReConnect Program, offers federal loans, grants, and loan/grant combinations to facilitate broadband deployment to rural areas without access to sufficient broadband service.<sup>9</sup> Eligible entities include cooperatives and non-profits, for-profit companies, and state and local governments and their agencies and political subdivisions. Applicants requesting a grant or a loan/grant combination under the ReConnect Program are required to submit a scoring sheet by which USDA may analyze nine separate evaluation criteria to score the application. One

of the evaluation criteria is whether the proposed project is in a state with a broadband plan that has been updated within the previous 5 years.

USDA is currently providing significant amounts of grant monies throughout the country. In addition, in many areas local communities have conducted or are conducting broadband feasibility studies for their communities. These and other activities underscore the readiness and eagerness to move forward.

Rural Florida has been behind too long in developing accessible, reliable, affordable, high speed internet to its communities. Closing the digital gap is critical. It is important to understand the environment in rural Florida counties and regions differ. These differences must be accommodated to successfully reach the overall goal. The mapping of resources is critical in understanding what exists and what should be included in a comprehensive plan to address the gaps.

HB 969 provides the platform for the State of Florida and the current interests of rural organizations like the Small County Coalition, the Florida Association of Counties, the Florida Regional Councils Association, the Florida Rural Economic Development Association and the Small School District Council Consortium and other entities provide a great opportunity to move forward.

### **Ensuring Industry Expansion of Service**

Clearly one of the main obstacles in achieving rural high-speed internet service is the lack of facilities in rural service areas. Current service providers have not provided ample facilities because of the costs. Without a reasonable return on investment, the likelihood they do so in the future is not promising. The legislature should consider a grant program for the service providers to build-out their networks in rural Florida. The grant program could be managed in a similar fashion as the Rural Development Grant program whereby the service provider would build-out their network and once the network is built and operational, the service provider could submit for either all of their cost or some subset of the cost to be reimbursed. It should be noted the expectations of service provider receiving the grant would be providing the service at a significantly lower cost to the end user than if the service provider had to pay for the extension of service themselves. This would accomplish two important elements needed for success - service providers would be able to receive monetary support on the buildout and the customer could see a potential reduction in cost of the service.

### **Available References -**

- [U.S. Federal Communications Commission, 2018 Broadband Deployment Report, at 1 \(Feb. 2, 2018-20-5A1.pdf](#).
- [American Broadband Initiative, Milestones Report, at 112019/files/american broadband initiative milestones report feb 2019 0.pdf](#)
- [Broadband USA - NTIA, State Broadband Initiative](#)
- [U.S. Federal Communications Commission, FCC Launches \\$20 Billion Rural Digital Opportunity Fund-launches-20-billion-rural-digitalopportunity-fund-0](#)
- [USDA, Broadband](#)
- [Id. 11 S. 338.2278\(1\)\(d\), F.S. See also Florida Department of Transportation, M-CORES](#)
- [Laws of Florida codifying HB 969 in Florida Statutes](#)
- [Final staff analysis of HB 969 after passage during the 2020 Legislative Session -11-20 final 1959.pdf](#)
- [FCC Consumer Guide Broadband Speed Guide -speed-guide](#)

## House Bill 969

The 2020 Florida Legislature moved forward to begin addressing the lack of broadband service in the state by passing legislation calling for a comprehensive, collaborative effort to expand broadband capacity in every community across the State of Florida. The Legislature passed [HB 969](#) creating the Florida Office of Broadband within the Department of Economic Opportunity's Division of Community Development. HB 969 called for a comprehensive initiative to develop, market, and promote broadband Internet services to Florida. DEO was designated as the lead state agency and given the responsibility to facilitate the expansion of broadband Internet service in the state. The establishment of the Office of Broadband will enhance the ability of the State of Florida to be more competitive in seeking funding and support at the Federal level. However, the legislation contemplates more than enhancing DEO's competitive status for grants. The department is directed to collaborate with private businesses, and to receive staffing support and other resources from, Enterprise Florida, Inc., state agencies, local governments, and community organizations. HB 969 provides the "roadmap" directing the Office of Broadband to do the following:

- Create a strategic plan that has goals and strategies for increasing the use of broadband Internet service in the state. The plan must include a process to review and verify public input regarding transmission speeds and availability of broadband Internet service throughout the state. *Note - The FCC Household Broadband Guide currently suggests 12-25 Mbps for households that may have 2 users or devices at a time where basic functions include email, browsing, basic video, Internet radio, plus one high-demand application such as: streaming HD video, multiparty video conferencing, online gaming, and telecommuting. The FCC recommends more than 25Mbps for more advanced uses. <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/broadband-speed-guide>*
- Build and facilitate local technology planning teams or partnerships with members representing cross-sections of the community, which may include, but are not limited to, representatives from the following organizations and industries: libraries, K-12 education, colleges and universities, local health care providers, private businesses, community organizations, economic development organizations, local governments, tourism, parks and recreation, and agriculture.
- Encourage the use of broadband Internet service, especially in the rural, unserved, or/and underserved communities of the state through grant programs having effective strategies to facilitate the statewide deployment of broadband Internet service. For any grants to be awarded, priority must be given to projects that:
  - 1. Provide access to broadband education, awareness, training, access, equipment, and support to libraries, schools, colleges and universities, health care providers, and community support organizations.
  - 2. Encourage the sustainable adoption of broadband in primarily underserved areas by removing barriers to entry.
  - 3. Work toward encouraging investments in establishing affordable and sustainable broadband Internet service in underserved/unserved areas of the state.
  - 4. Facilitate the development of applications, programs, and services, including, but not limited to, telework, telemedicine, and e-learning to increase the usage of, and demand for, broadband Internet service in the state.
- Monitor, participate in, and provide input in proceedings of the Federal Communications Commission and other federal agencies related to the geographic availability and deployment of broadband Internet service in the state as necessary to ensure that this information is accurately presented and that rural, whether unserved/underserved areas of the state are best positioned to benefit from federal and state broadband deployment programs.

## Recommendations for Consideration

The success of the Office of Broadband will require the highest level of support from Florida's government officials and the private sector. Strong support from the Office of the Governor, Agency Leadership, Local Governments, Private Providers and other organizations that rely on the use of broadband services. Coordination and Collaboration is needed to underscore the importance of this initiative and to encourage the involvement necessary to address the challenges and accomplish the goal. In that regard, the following requests/recommendation are made:

- Governor DeSantis, State Officials, Private Sector Leadership, Local Government and other stakeholders should support a comprehensive set of actions to set the foundation for moving this initiative forward.
  - The State of Florida should make sure that a high-level state official remains engaged to oversee the development and implementation of the strategic plan.
  - The Office of Broadband should consider establishing a “Working Group” made up of representatives of public and private interests to assist the State of Florida in guiding the development of the strategic plan and participate in follow up efforts related to implementation of the plan.
- In accordance with the development of the strategic plan required in HB 969 the following actions should be considered:
  - Local technology planning teams should be initiated to assess local access and to determine specific needs to address internet access at the local level- the membership of which may include education, health care, private business, agriculture, economic development organizations, local government, and tourism representatives.
  - An up-to-date map of internet capacity should be developed documenting the areas of the state that have access, have limited access and have no access.
  - A set of metrics should be adopted to establish a baseline of current availability and speeds of broadband service throughout Florida for use in assessing progress toward the goal of universal broadband.
  - There should be an inventory established of all agency and state funded programs related to digital connectivity. This inventory should serve as the basis to direct collaboration and focus to maximize the use of state resources.
  - There should be an inventory established of recent plans and/or studies developed by state, regional, and local entities to determine where initiatives have been designed and the extent to which they have been implemented.
  - Available resources in the public and private sector should be identified that could be acquired through application or legislative initiative that would facilitate implementation of the elements of the strategic plan; and,
  - There should be a set of initiatives that can be pursued at the State and Federal level that could provide service providers and other entities ideas and resources to develop and expand broadband access.

**Specific Actions for Counties to Consider:**

- Counties should adopt a local resolution supporting the Internet Services Initiative
- Counties should document the current status of internet service throughout the county.
- Counties should identify a person to serve as the point of contact for engagement regarding the coordination of information with DEO's Office of Broadband
- Counties should begin considering the make-up of the local technology teams outlined in HB 969 and work with DEO to structure those for engagement.
- Counties, if applicable, should identify recent, current, or planned feasibility studies that have or will be conducted and send them to the Office of Broadband.
- Counties should outline current providers and services that exist in their communities and describe the current state of reliable, affordable high-speed internet in their county.
- Counties should incorporate the mapping application "Testit!" as a standard for providing information on accessibility in their communities.

**Action Requested - #1**  
***Adopt A Resolution Supporting the Goal of Affordable and Reliable High-Speed Internet Throughout Florida***

Whereas, reliable and affordable high-speed internet access is essential for Floridians to be prosperous and meet today's challenges; and

Whereas, the absence of access to reliable and affordable high-speed internet service prevents communities from achieving the high quality of life that is considered a fundamental component for educational and economic success; and,

Whereas, the absence and/or lack of high-speed internet:

- hinders the ability for all schoolchildren to have access to educational opportunities,
- hinders access telemedicine to improve health outcomes for its residents, and to provide access without demanding travel and transportation,
- hinders the ability for rapid communication between the public and law enforcement agencies; and,
- hinders the ability for communities to maintain and expand business opportunities, stimulate job growth and
- hinders that ability engage in innovative technologies that are required for a vibrant economy.

Whereas, the Florida Legislature recently passed House Bill 969 creating an Office of Broadband within the Department of Economic Opportunity requiring the creation of a strategic plan that has goals and strategies for increasing the use of broadband Internet service in the state, and,

Whereas, it is imperative that the strategic plan be based on accurate and up-to-date mapping and the internet access needs of the public and private sector, and,

Whereas, the National Association of Counties has developed – Test It! an easy to use “mapping tool” that can be used to assess availability of internet, and,

Whereas, in order to meet the goal of universal access to high-speed internet, it will be necessary to determine what the private providers need to provide affordable and reliable connectivity in sparsely located areas. the support necessary to address issues of sparse populations and to provide expanded internet services, and engages governmental entities at the Federal, State and Local level in order to be successful.

Now therefore be it resolved that the \_\_\_\_\_ supports the State of Florida, the Department of Economic Opportunities in the effort to achieve access to reliable and affordable high-speed internet access to every household and business throughout the State of Florida.

Be it further resolved that the \_\_\_\_\_ will support the State Office of Broadband and participate in the implementation of HB 969 including providing information, assisting in mapping efforts, and supporting other such efforts that will lead to enhanced access to affordable, reliable high-speed internet services throughout \_\_\_\_\_ County and the State of Florida .



### **ACTION REQUESTED - #2**

Each County Should Prepare a narrative overview of Internet Services in your Community  
**DOCUMENT THE STATUS OF INTERNET SERVICE IN YOUR COMMUNITY**

To prepare for participation in discussions regarding enhancing or expanding internet services in your community, it is recommended that each county should develop a narrative documenting the current status of access to reliable, affordable, high-speed internet services throughout your county. This narrative should provide an overview of the current status of accessibility, reliability, affordability, and speed. Here are some suggested questions that will help:

- On a scale of 1 – 5 – (1 being great to 5 being non-existent) how would you rate the access, reliability, affordability and speed of the internet services in your county?

Accessibility – 1 – 2 – 3 -4 – 5 – Comment:

Reliability – 1 – 2 – 3 -4 – 5 – Comment

Affordability – 1 – 2 – 3 -4 – 5 – Comment

Speed – 1 – 2 – 3 -4 – 5 – Comment

- Does your county have an accurate map of accessibility and strength of internet services throughout your county?
- How are internet services currently provided in your county?
- What is the biggest need in terms of addressing the status of affordable, reliable high-speed internet services?
- Does your county have a plan for enhancing/expanding internet services in your county?
- If you do have a plan, was the plan developed based on a feasibility study or some other proposal? (if there is a copy please have it available for reference)
- Is there currently an initiative under consideration/development to provide enhanced/expanded access to internet services in your county? Please describe.
- How would your county benefit from universal access to reliable, affordable, high-speed internet services throughout your county

### **ACTION REQUESTED - #3**

#### **DESIGNATE CONTACT FOR YOUR LOCAL TECHNOLOGY PLANNING TEAM**

Specific Action - Each county should identify a person to serve as point of contact for their local technology planning team. The Office of Broadband will be working with these team regarding specific information needs and actions in their local area and region.

Background - The Florida Office of Broadband is tasked with the requirement to build and facilitate local technology planning teams or partnerships with members representing cross-sections of the community, which may include, but are not limited to, representatives from the following organizations and industries: libraries, K-12 education, colleges and universities, local health care providers, private businesses, community organizations, economic development organizations, local governments, tourism, parks and recreation, and agriculture.

**SAMPLE RESOLUTION**  
**OKEECHOBEE COUNTY**  
**BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS**  
**OKEECHOBEE COUNTY, FLORIDA**

**RESOLUTION 2020-\_\_\_\_\_**

**A RESOLUTION OF THE OKEECHOBEE COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY  
COMMISSIONERS, SUPPORTING AFFORDABLE AND RELIABLE  
HIGH-SPEED INTERNET THROUGHOUT FLORIDA.**

**WHEREAS**, reliable and affordable high-speed internet access is essential for Floridians to be prosperous and meet today's challenges; and

**WHEREAS**, the absence of access to reliable and affordable high-speed internet service prevents communities from achieving the high quality of life that is considered a fundamental component for educational and economic success; and

**WHEREAS**, the absence and/or lack of high-speed internet:

- hinders the ability for all schoolchildren to have access to educational opportunities;
- hinders access to telemedicine to improve health outcomes for its residents, and to provide access without demanding travel and transportation;
- hinders the ability for rapid communication between the public and law enforcement agencies;
- hinders the ability for communities to maintain and expand business opportunities, stimulate job growth;
- hinders the ability to engage in innovative technologies that are required for a vibrant economy.

**WHEREAS**, the Florida Legislature recently passed House Bill 969 creating an Office of Broadband within the Department of Economic Opportunity requiring the creation of a strategic plan that has goals and strategies for increasing the use of broadband Internet service in the state; and

**WHEREAS**, it is imperative that the strategic plan be based on accurate and up-to-date mapping and the internet access needs of the public and private sector; and

**WHEREAS**, the National Association of Counties has developed – Test It! an easy to use “mapping tool” that can be used to assess availability of internet; and

**WHEREAS**, in order to meet the goal of universal access to high-speed internet, it will be necessary to determine what the private providers need to provide affordable and reliable

connectivity in sparsely located areas, and the support necessary to address issues of sparse populations and to provide expanded internet services, and engage governmental entities at the Federal, State and Local level in order to be successful.

**NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** by the Board of County Commissioners of Okeechobee County, Florida, as follows:

**Section 1. The above recitals are true and correct and incorporated in this Resolution.**

**Section 2.** That the Okeechobee County Board of County Commissioners, hereby supports the State of Florida, the Department of Economic Opportunities in the effort to achieve access to reliable and affordable high-speed internet access to every household and business throughout the State of Florida.

**Section 3.** That the Board of County Commissioners will assist the State Office of Broadband by participating as needed in meeting the obligations of HB 969 including providing information, assistance in mapping efforts, and supporting other such efforts that will lead to enhanced access to affordable, reliable high-speed internet services throughout Okeechobee County and the State of Florida.

**Section 4.** This Resolution shall become effective immediately upon adoption.

**APPROVED and ADOPTED by the Board of County Commissioners of Okeechobee County, Florida, on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of November, 2020.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Terry W. Burroughs, Chair  
BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS  
OKEECHOBEE COUNTY, FLORIDA

ATTEST:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sharon Robertson, Clerk  
BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS  
OKEECHOBEE COUNTY, FLORIDA

**Approved as to form and legality:**

**By:**  
**Wade Vose, Okeechobee County Attorney**



**For Additional Information Contact**

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**For Questions about HB 969 or the DEO Office of Broadband Contact**

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