



BENTON-FRANKLIN COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

Regional Planning Agency for Benton & Franklin Counties

Benton-Franklin Metropolitan Planning Organization • Regional Transportation Planning Organization
Benton-Franklin Economic Development District

BFCOG Executive Director's Report

Report To: Franklin County Commissioners

Meeting Date: May 2, 2023

Staff Contact: Michelle Holt, Executive Director

Regarding: Franklin County Broadband Action Team Update

Action: Submit a Request for Rapid Design Study from Washington State Broadband Office

Request:

Requesting that, if the Franklin County Commissioners are willing, an email be sent to Connie Rivera at connie.rivera@commerce.wa.gov indicating that you are requesting a Rapid Design Study through the Washington State Broadband Office on behalf of Franklin County.

Background

Broadband Action Teams (BAT) - BFCOG and Franklin PUD have partnered to jointly facilitate and support Broadband Action Teams in Franklin and Benton Counties. BFCOG is the fiscal agent for both BATs to receive grant funding to support planning efforts. Ben Hooper with Franklin PUD is the Champion (lead) for the Franklin BAT, and Michelle Holt with BFCOG is the Champion (lead) for the Benton County BAT. Current participants include Franklin PUD, Benton PUD, Mid-Columbia Libraries, Richland Public Libraries, Benton-Franklin United Way, Benton-Franklin Health District, WSU Extension, Port of Pasco, and BFCOG. More organizations continue to join each week as outreach is continued.

The **WA State Broadband Office (WSBO)**, under the WA State Department of Commerce, is focused on solutions to the broadband delivery gap. Additional collaborating partners include the Public Works Board, the Community Economic Revitalization Board, and the WA Office on Equity. State and federal grants are incentivizing investment in difficult-to-serve areas with underserved and unserved populations. WSBO is encouraging the creation of local Broadband Action Teams in every County to centralize broadband conversations and drive engagement with the WSBO, determine community technology and accessibility needs, and connect user groups and providers to set project goals collaboratively.

Rapid Design Studies - WSBO has funded a consultant to do Rapid Design Studies (feasibility study) for Counties. This study will assess and map current broadband assets

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to help develop strategies for addressing outstanding needs. It will also scope project details, bringing them closer to shovel and proposal ready. WSBO requires an email request from a County Commissioner to initiate this plan. The plan does not in any way obligate the entire County. The plan will provide a Broadband Map and Excel workbook with cost tabs to estimate the needs and cost scenarios to bring broadband service to the County. Scenarios include all fiber build-out, all wireless build-out, and a couple of hybrid options.

The Rapid Design Study information will help our Franklin County BAT complete the plans described below if received in time. Even if the data does not come in time, it will provide essential data points for broadband/internet service providers to support expansion consideration.

County Broadband and Digital Equity Plans - Through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), the federal government established \$65B in programs to bring all US residents online. Most of these programs will be implemented at the state level and focus on broadband and digital equity. Two programs, the **Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD)** and **Digital Equity Act (DEA)**, require the states to engage in local coordination efforts established under the IIJA.

To accomplish this, WSBO has partnered with Washington State University (WSU) Extension to support the capacity of BATs and Tribes in developing local **Broadband Action Plans** and **Digital Equity Action Plans**. The Action Plans developed under this program will be provided to WSBO to inform the development of Washington's Five-Year Action Plan and the State Digital Equity Plan. These will be submitted to the National Telecommunication and Information Agency (NTIA), allowing Washington to receive a minimum of \$100M in BEAD program funding. The actual share will be based on the relative percentage of unserved/underserved locations and is estimated with a potential of up to \$1.2B. The Digital Equity Grant's eventual share is unknown, but the program is allocated \$2.75B nationally.

The local Action Plans will provide WSBO with the local input and data they need to create a well-informed broadband and digital equity plan. (Although referred to as local action "plans," the work is gathering data, completing information worksheets prepared by WSU Extension, and writing an Executive Summary. There is no analysis or "plan development" as we traditionally think.) The gathered information will also provide a local framework for planning and implementing projects to expand broadband infrastructure and promote digital equity in our communities. Results from the local action plans will be compiled and utilized to inform WSBO and Legislative priorities and allocation strategy for the State's BEAD funding.

The WSBO, through their partnership with WSU Extension, has planning grants of \$59,117 to support the BAT execution of the local **Broadband Action Plans** (\$15,000) and **Digital Equity Action Plans** (\$44,117) for each county-level BAT. To receive this grant, an organization must serve as the fiscal agent and sign a Scope of Work agreement with WSU Extension to create and submit the action plans. BFCOG, acting as the fiscal

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agent, has submitted the necessary paperwork to secure this funding to support our local BATs. **This is \$118,234 in planning funds to produce these plans for Benton and Franklin Counties.** Aside from producing the plans, there is no ongoing commitment related to receiving these funds. **The deadline for submission of the local action plans to WSBO is June 14, 2023.**

Invitations have been extended to community stakeholders to participate in BAT meetings to support the completion of these plans. They are using their networks to share surveys that will help gather information and are providing data about existing infrastructure. Web pages for each BAT have been added to BFCOG's website, www.bfcog.us/broadbandactionteams, and promotional materials have been created to support the completion of surveys. (See attached.)

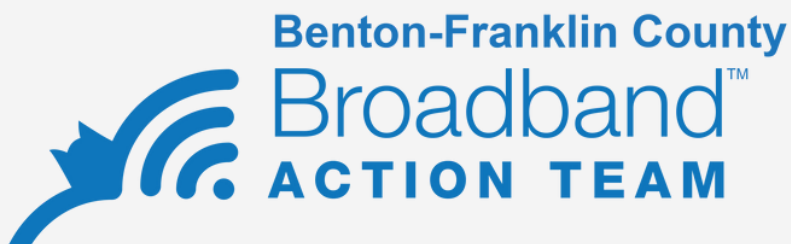
We intend that the BATs will continue to be available to support broadband efforts on behalf of our counties after these initial planning efforts are completed.

Attachments:

- BAT Anchor Institutions Survey
- Digital Equity Survey Flyer



Help Us Improve Broadband Access



About Us

www.bfcog.us/broadbandactionteams

Our vision is to work with all stakeholders collaboratively and inclusively throughout Benton & Franklin Counties to equitably and affordably expand and enhance broadband service to improve the quality of life & economic resilience for all county residents.

Anchor Institutions Survey

We are conducting an inventory of the locations and speeds of the existing broadband services for Community Anchor Institutions – and identifying the gaps in broadband coverage. Filling out this survey can help our community attract new funding and target investments to the areas with the most need. Any information you disclose may become publicly available.

How You Can Help



Please take 5 minutes to complete the Anchor Institutions Survey.

BENTON COUNTY SURVEY

<https://forms.gle/gFq8ShE2DfDwsKNa6>

FRANKLIN COUNTY SURVEY

<https://forms.gle/fUg164Vqb5ERNXjU9>



Need to Check Your Speed?

<https://www.commerce.wa.gov/building-infrastructure/washington-statewide-broadband-act/speedtestsurvey/>



Help Us Improve Broadband Access



Benton-Franklin County
Broadband[™]
ACTION TEAM

About Us

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Digital Equity Matters

The pandemic taught us the importance of internet access and digital literacy. It also highlighted that not everyone has the same digital access or knowledge. Gathering information on the digital assets available in our community will help us identify gaps and improve accessibility.

www.bfcog.us/broadbandactionteams

How You Can Help

Do you work for an agency that serves a special population in the community?

(Individuals with disabilities, low income, English learners, veterans, race or ethnic minorities, seniors, formerly incarcerated, housing insecure, youth in foster care, etc.)

Please take 5 minutes to complete the Digital Asset Inventory Survey.



**Take The Digital Asset
Inventory Survey**

BENTON COUNTY SURVEY

<https://forms.gle/wU3WeV1zQkjA56AX7>

FRANKLIN COUNTY SURVEY

<https://forms.gle/5uvvErqfny1u98RP9>