

To the Mayor and Members of the City Council**August 6, 2024**

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**SUBJECT: BROADBAND ENHANCEMENT EFFORTS UPDATE**

The purpose of this Informal Report is to provide an update on broadband enhancement efforts.

Background:

The neighborhood wireless service program was launched to address the digital divide in lower-income areas, where 25 million U.S. households lack regular internet access. It provides immediate wireless connectivity for remote education, job searches, telemedicine, and other essential services. Established in five targeted neighborhoods, the program ensures high-quality internet like that in libraries and community centers, bridging the gap to future wired broadband infrastructure. The City, in partnership with Sprocket Networks, aims to enhance access to high-speed broadband and improve municipal services. Sprocket Networks will seek funding from the State of Texas' federal Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program.

The Texas Broadband Development Office (BDO) BEAD Program Update:

The Texas BDO submitted its Initial Proposal to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), ensuring reliable, affordable, high-speed broadband for all residents. Volume 1 of the proposal was approved in April 2024, while Volume 2 is still pending approval. The subgrantee selection process depends on the NTIA's approval of Volume 2. The BEAD challenge process is tentatively planned to begin in Summer 2024, though specific dates have not been provided.

Sprocket Networks Update:

The City partnered with Sprocket Networks to enhance high-speed broadband access and improve municipal services. From November 2023 to February 2024, the contract was awarded, initial funding secured, and the full program build-out defined. Current efforts include securing program debt, equity financing, and participation; developing the municipal network design and construction plans; and creating fiber-to-the-home (FTTX) distribution plans with a focus on underserved areas. The City's network construction will be completed over a three-year period, with additional residential and commercial internet service provided to adjacent neighborhoods as construction progresses.

Sprocket Networks plans to apply for a portion of the State of Texas' BEAD Program funds. They have engaged financial advisors Layer7 for equity and WG Nielsen for debt, and hired HBK Engineering for the high-level network design, which will cover approximately 300 linear miles, with 90% underground, connecting 224 municipal facilities and passing over 90,000 homes.

Sprocket tentatively selected FiberTex Inc. of Lubbock, TX, as the general contractor, prioritizing the FTTX and municipal segments in 2024 and 2025. Construction of the first part of the transport fiber network is planned to start in the second half of 2024, beginning at Old City Hall, moving west of downtown along 7th Street, and then heading southwest down Camp Bowie toward the Las Vegas Trail area. This project will connect approximately 18 City locations to the CFW data

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center and extend fiber broadband into the Las Vegas Trail neighborhood, where many residents currently lack access to fiber-based internet service.

In collaboration with CFW staff, Sprocket is preparing a proposal to solicit Broadband Infrastructure Fund grant monies from the BDO. This initiative aims to bring FTTX to approximately 1,000 MDU residential units in underserved communities. Additionally, Sprocket is negotiating with an established DFW carrier interested in partnering on the full municipal network design and build project.

Neighborhood Wi-Fi Program Update:

Wireless internet service initiative was successfully launched in five neighborhood improvement areas: Stop Six, Ash Crescent, Northside, Rosemont, and Como. This project addresses the digital divide, providing essential internet access for remote education, employment searches, telemedicine, and other critical services. Short-term goals focus on improving public safety, investing in infrastructure, and increasing community engagement.

Looking ahead, the initiative aims to promote economic revitalization, reduce poverty through supportive services, and improve connectivity to support learning and employment. By providing immediate wireless internet access, the program bridges the gap to more extensive wired broadband infrastructure. This approach ensures that residents and businesses receive high-quality service like that in libraries and community centers, paving the way for future comprehensive broadband implementation and fostering a more connected and prosperous community.

Next Steps – Digital Navigator’s Program Development:

City staff are coordinating with the North Texas Innovation Alliance (NTXIA), internal stakeholders, and external stakeholders to explore a Digital Navigator’s Program. This program aims to bridge the digital divide by potentially providing access to personalized support, essential devices, affordable internet access, and comprehensive digital skills training to underserved individuals and communities. These programs help people navigate and utilize online services, connect to vital resources, and advocate for policies that promote digital inclusion. By offering tailored support, they ensure diverse populations can fully participate in the digital world, fostering a more inclusive and connected society.

If you have any questions or comments, please reach out to Kevin Gunn at x2015 or kevin.gunn@fortworthtexas.gov.

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