

# Effort underway to bring broadband to Promise Zone counties

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Getting connected is considered by many people to be essential in today's world of smartphones and computers, but getting connected in rural areas has long been considered too costly and an out-of-reach dream.

Maybe not, if people involved with the South Carolina Lowcountry Promise Zone have anything to do with it.

When SouthernCarolina Alliance staff working on Promise Zone initiatives polled stakeholders in the six-county area of Allendale, Bamberg, Barnwell, Colleton, Hampton and Jasper counties in recent months, they targeted the development of broadband Internet networks as their top priority in both near-term projects and long-term transformational networks.

“Having these networks will help achieve economic development and community development goals by making the region more attractive to business growth, thereby reducing poverty and creating more community opportunities,” states the SCPZ strategic action plan.

That's why a broadband workshop in Barnwell on March 23 drew representatives from Connect SC, Atlantic Broadband, AT&T, Century Link and Palmetto Rural Telephone Corporation as well as those from the United States Department of Agriculture (who oversees some federal Promise Zone programs), universities, colleges, council of governments and local people.

A challenge in many areas of the country is “getting people all to move in the same direction,” said Brandon McBride,

administrator of Rural Utilities Service in Washington, D.C. “What you are doing here is not common.”

Integral to the effort is funding from the federal government. “We are helping this area to compete regionally and nationally,” said Michelle Cardwell, acting state director of USDA Rural Development.

One enlightenment to many was that there is already an effort to improve the quality of connectivity in the Promise Zone area. Many of the companies are already one year into a federally-funded project to “install Internet to areas that have none,” said Jim Stritzinger of Connect SC, a non-profit organization tasked with developing the geographic information system (GIS) or simply, maps, of Internet availability in the state.

## All about speed

It's all about the speed of transmitting information – downloading and uploading information that translates into distance learning, telemedicine, commercial/industrial communications and entertainment.

To have broadband capabilities, consumers would need 25 megabits download speeds and 3 mb upload. Currently, most of the Promise Zone area has less than 10 mb download and 1 upload speed, Stritzinger said.

Maps Stritzinger showed reveal that the South Carolina Lowcountry Promise Zone has mostly mobile wireless with some cable and DSL services available – well below the 10/1 speeds minimum desired.

Working with Connect America, states “are able to get federal grants to install Internet systems to areas that have none,” said Stritzinger.

Currently there is a \$16 million project underway to bring a majority of areas in the Promise Zone from its current “underserved” status to the 10/1 minimum” by 2020. At least 40 percent of the project is required to be completed by 2017. Representatives from several of the communications companies said this week they are deep into the project and expect to meet the 40 percent deadline on time.

The workshop was a way to bring together these companies, the USDA and local stakeholders to talk and collaborate to make the ConnectSC and other related projects successful.

“A lot of people don’t understand the benefits of having broadband in their household,” said Stritzinger. “There are children who are disconnected” from opportunities, he said. “This is a really big deal.”

### **Jasper schools know importance**

Marva Tigner, Executive Director of Academics and Federal Programs with Jasper County School District, understands.

“The needs in high poverty areas are so different than in other areas,” she said.

Distance learning and virtual programs enables her students to have resources that they wouldn’t have living in a poor, rural county.

“Performances increase when environmental opportunities increase,” she said.

“We have the opportunities for distance learning, virtual field trips, health courses such as nutrition and supplemental health, and we can interact with medical facilities,”

she said. “This is not just for the students. This creates opportunities for the parents as well.”

“The opportunities are limitless,” she said. “Having access can open a whole new world for our schools in Jasper County.”

Many schools are getting funding to provide iPads and laptop computers to every student but there’s a catch. “You can’t use the equipment if you don’t have the bandwidth to support it,” she said.

One participant noted that students now are not given Internet-based homework because the children do not have access at home or, if they do, don’t have the digital speed to watch streaming programs.

The grants from the USDA and other sources are considered to be an opportunity for communications companies to provide services they couldn’t otherwise afford.

“The Connect America Funds are a wonderful alternative for us,” said Zel Gilbert, State Regulatory and Legislative Affairs Director for Century Link. “This gives us an incentive and enables us to reach these high-cost areas.”

It’s no small task. “This is a very, very large project for us,” said Ike Byrd, Regional Director of AT&T.

Each of the companies involved are providing the improved speeds in different ways. Some say they will use fiber optic wiring, others will use cable, and still others will use a network of satellite dishes to transmit data.

But the goal is the same – to get the rural areas within the Promise Zone (and other areas of the state) to an improved state of access.

But once that access is in place, people still have to use it.

There are three stages, explained Stritzinger, “Access, adoption and use.” This includes schools, libraries, government facilities, healthcare facilities, economic development, agriculture and more.

“Access is getting the stuff in place. Adoption is getting people to use it. Use is gaining the skills and applications available.”

“These services have to be offered at a reasonable cost or the public isn’t going to use it,” he said.

Sandy Steele, Director of Operations for Southern Carolina Regional Alliance, said bringing everyone together for the workshop was a first step. “We want everyone to think about their organization and what they can do to improve the state of broadband.”

She hoped that, through collaboration, companies, governments, organizations and individuals can find ways to bring broadband to the Promise Zone in a smoother and more effective manner.

“The next steps lay in your laps.”

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