



County of Albemarle

Broadband Accessibility & Affordability Office

Proposal: The Albemarle Broadband Authority should be delegated by the Board of Supervisors to issue Letters of Support for BEAD Applications on behalf of Albemarle County, with staff support from the Broadband Accessibility and Affordability Office in evaluating and recommending applications for support.

Background: Albemarle County has been a recognized leader in broadband expansion across Virginia for over a decade. In 2017, the Board of Supervisors established the Albemarle Broadband Authority (ABBA) to serve as the County's subject matter expert and pursue grant opportunities with the goal of achieving universal broadband access.

Since its formation, ABBA has participated in five Virginia Telecommunications Initiative (VATI) awards, including a major project led by the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission in 2022. This collaboration with Firefly Fiber Broadband will connect over 5,000 locations in Albemarle County.

In addition to leveraging VATI funding, the Broadband Office has secured \$2 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds, supplemented by general fund contributions appropriated by the Board of Supervisors. These funds are allocated toward a grant project that will connect an additional 1,400 locations by the end of 2025.

The federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) introduced the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program, which aims to achieve universal broadband access nationwide. Virginia received nearly \$1.5 billion in BEAD funding, with the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) overseeing the program. While localities were the applicants for VATI funding, BEAD applications will be submitted by broadband providers.

To date, DHCD has received letters of intent from 16 providers expressing plans to serve Albemarle County, including incumbent providers such as Comcast, Brightspeed, and Firefly, as well as new entrants like SpaceX and Amazon. The BEAD application process is currently open, with providers required to submit applications by March 31, 2024, contingent on NTIA's approval of DHCD's Challenge Process by January 1, 2024.

Local engagement plays a significant role in BEAD application scoring, with letters of support from localities accounting for 10% of the evaluation criteria. DHCD has provided localities with broad discretion in determining designees to issue these letters and the factors to consider when doing so.

Given ABBA's established expertise and leadership in broadband expansion, it is the body best equipped to evaluate and issue BEAD letters of support in a timely, informed, and strategic manner.

Recommendation: Staff recommends the Board adopt the Resolution to Delegate to ABBA Authority to Issue BEAD Grant Letters of Support for Internet Service Provider Grant Applicants.