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**DEPARTMENTAL PLAN OF ACTION**

**Issue:** Improving Broadband access in St. Mary's County.

**Date of Report:** February 16, 2022

**Department:** Information Technology

**Director:** Robert Kelly

**SUMMARY:**

In recent years, St. Mary's County has invested in the expansion of existing commercial Cable Providers networks to allow service to be extended to areas which may not be economically feasible for commercial vendors to expand. The infusion of government grant funding has expanded the Middle Mile service in many underserved areas in our county. By funding the construction of these plant expansions, the county offsets the capital improvement costs of the vendor without assuming any maintenance and/or support costs associated with the services already being provided by the vendor. In 2021, the St. Mary's County Public Schools (SMCPS) requested assistance from the county in identifying and resolving the connectivity limitations for students without broadband; in response to the Covid-19 assembly restrictions.

To meet the challenge, a collaborative effort between the county, SMCPS, the State of Maryland, the Federal Government of the United States, and Service Providers have been working to identify the county addresses where wired broadband service is not currently available. Analysis is nearly complete which will determine the actual construction costs for connecting the remaining unserved addresses within the county.

The investment to date has provided wired broadband connectivity to 98.5% of SMCPS students and 94.7% connectivity for all registered addresses in the county. Building on our previous successes and methodologies and leveraging as much grant funding possible, staff recommends the following Plan of Action to achieve the Maryland Legislator's goal of providing 98% broadband connectivity by 2026.

**PROJECT PLAN OF ACTION:**

Approval of the following projects will provide broadband service to underserved addresses as funding allows:

- **Middle Mile** – Additional wired broadband infrastructure would provide broadband coverage for critical activities including tele-work, tele-health, and tele-school capabilities to clusters of identified underserved/unserved addresses in the county. Installation of middle mile infrastructure provides connectivity path to connect these remote areas.
- **Last Mile** - Broadband for Unserved Citizens (BUC) – Extending Broadband to county addresses using the methodology established under the Broadband for Unserved Students (BUS) Grant would begin to address the connectivity needs for all St. Mary's non-connected addresses. Once all county addresses meeting the BUS Grant maximum distance have had the opportunity to connect, addresses beyond may be eligible to enter into a cost sharing agreement.
- **Facility connectivity and security** – Enhanced digital and physical security requires networking

infrastructure and security equipment. Security and operations throughout the county would significantly benefit with connectivity to existing county infrastructure, WiFi, security, and video systems.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

It is likely that to connect as many addresses as possible as quickly as possible, a combination of Middle Mile, Last Mile, and wireless solutions will be necessary. Middle and Last Mile efforts require more initial capital and time to construct but, allow ongoing connectivity costs funded by the government to be eliminated. Wireless solutions present several challenges including security and ongoing cost but, state plans for an Educational Wireless Network plans rely on locals to provide vertical assets. Alternative emerging options may supplement extremely remote addresses if State and/or Federal opportunities allow deployment (Starlink). Staff recommends utilizing a data driven response which combines all available options and flexibility to adjust spending cross projects as cost estimates and walkouts reveal more accurate information to connect as many addresses as possible.

**SIGNED:**

(Director/Department Head)

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County Administrator Use

CA/Director Meeting Held: Approved, Dan West 2.16.22

Plan Approved  Plan Not Approved  Plan Approved w/ Amendments

Follow -Up Requested: YES or NO TYPE: \_\_\_\_\_