



WHITESIDE COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Whiteside County Board Approves Plan for Countywide Fiber Broadband

This One Big Thing

Morrison, IL (September 20, 2022) In a 23-0 in favor vote, the Whiteside County Board approved a plan to bring reliable and robust fiber broadband access to the underserved/unserved residents, businesses and organizations of Whiteside County. The plan, recommended to the Board by the Connect Whiteside Committee, will see the equitable deployment of approximately 1000 miles of fiber broadband access to over 8,000 addresses and over 21,000 residents. The project is estimated to cost in excess of \$70 million, and Whiteside County will commit \$3 million from the ARPA funds the County received.

Whiteside County Board Chair James Duffy said, “Tonight’s vote is an important milestone for Whiteside County. Bringing high-speed broadband fiber to the entire County is a big thing. It is comparable to bringing the railroad to communities in the 19th century or the Interstate Highway system post WWII. The deployment of fiber broadband across the County will keep the County and its businesses competitive in today’s global environment, it will provide residents with an upgrade to their quality of life whether its remote work, education or healthcare, and greater access to entertainment options. The committee worked hard on this, and I believe we have chosen the right partner, Sand Prairie, to help us deploy broadband fiber to every corner of rural Whiteside County.”

The County and Sand Prairie (a service unit Jo-Carroll Energy, a local energy and broadband cooperative) will work together to take advantage of the historic Federal and State broadband funding currently available to accomplish the project.

Gary Camarano, Whiteside County Economic Development Director, commented, “This project will solve a long-term problem, leverage local engagement to ensure strong outcomes, and

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position the County to compete in a new digital economy that allows more and more Illinoisans to work, live, learn and recreate wherever they chose.”

The County recognizes that too many of its residents lack access to reliable, affordable broadband, a fact confirmed by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the importance of doing something about it.

The county took a methodical approach to measure the challenge, set clear goals, and select a provider partner through an open process – thanks in part to its participation in the Accelerate Illinois program, a collaborative effort supported by the Illinois Office of Broadband, University of Illinois Extension, and Benton Institute for Broadband & Society. The ConnectWhiteside Committee consisted of 18 members, and met over a 14-week period to discuss the connectivity problem, various methods to address it, best practices from across the nation, and the results of a community survey. The committee then researched potential Internet Service Providers (ISP), and followed up with an extensive interview process to select the ISP finalist. The result of the selection process was a unanimous vote of the committee to select local provider Sand Prairie.

“Since 1939, we have been delivering utility solutions to local underserved and unserved rural residents and communities in Northwest Illinois to enhance the quality of life,” said Mike Casper, Jo-Carroll Energy president & CEO. “We look forward to working with the County to accelerate the buildout of high-speed fiber internet service to homes, businesses, and communities throughout Whiteside County.”

Why This Matters

Whiteside County, like thousands of other rural communities across the country, faced what appeared to be a problem beyond its resources – the deployment of reliable, robust and affordable broadband fiber internet. The reality of the problem was that private sector providers did not view this market as being economically viable, and the result was often vast underserved and unserved areas of rural communities.

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (and the havoc it brought to the work place, education, and healthcare), Federal and State governments have made historic amounts of grant funding available to assist local governments in addressing this problem. The current window of opportunity to receive these grants requires action in the immediate future.

Whiteside County will commit \$3 million from the ARPA funds the County received. In addition to the ARPA funds, Jo-Carroll Energy will apply for matching grants funds to help accomplish the buildout in Whiteside County.

The result will be the equitable deployment of a reliable fiber broadband network across the County, the availability of broadband access to the entire County, and an answer to the broadband inequities that currently exist in the County.

Penny VanKampen, Whiteside County Treasurer, said, “This is huge! As a family that lives in underserved rural Whiteside County, we have experienced the lack of fast and reliable internet connectivity. We have school age children in the family, and it was really a problem with

remote learning during the pandemic, as well work related and quality of live issues. I am really looking forward to having a fast, reliable internet connection.”

What’s next?

With tonight’s approval, the County and Sand Prairie will finalize an agreement to work together, perform necessary engineering studies and project plans, and write and submit grant applications. The process will require close cooperation between the two parties to accomplish the deployment of 1,000 miles of fiber.

The estimated life of the project is five years, and as Mr. Camarano states, “This will definitely be worth it – for the improved quality of life and competitiveness it will bring to the County. This is a game changer for the County.”

About Jo-Carroll Energy and Sand Prairie

Jo-Carroll Energy is a not-for-profit distribution cooperative owned and controlled by the members it has reliably served since 1939. Headquartered in Elizabeth, the cooperative currently serves more than 26,800 electric, natural gas and/or broadband internet accounts in Jo Daviess, Carroll, Whiteside and Henry counties.

The Sand Prairie broadband division was created in 2008 with construction of an infrastructure backbone to enable communications with the cooperative’s substations and provide broadband services to members. Fiber broadband service was added in 2016, and, today, Sand Prairie serves approximately 3,100 members with fiber internet, VoIP phone service and other technology services.



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